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SCOTT GRIMANDO *(right)* is an accomplished illustrator and designer whose work has graced many book and magazine covers over the past seventeen years. His fine art paintings and prints can be seen on his Website at www.grimstudios.com. His Fairy paintings will be featured in the forthcoming second volume of the *Art of Faery* tentatively titled, *The World of Faery Art*, from Paper Tiger.

CHRISTOPHER BARZAK's stories have been published in *Nerve*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Strange Horizons*, and *The Vestal Review*, among others. His short story, "Plenty," was reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. He graduated from Clarion in 1998, and currently attends Youngstown State University, in Youngstown, Ohio, where he is pursuing his Master's degree in English

JAY LAKE *(left)* lives in Portland, Oregon with his family and their books, within sight of a 12,000-foot volcano. In addition to *Realms of Fantasy*, in 2004 he will have several dozen stories in print in markets as diverse as *Asimov's*, *Black Gate*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*. Two books of Jay's short fiction are available: *Greetings from Lake Wu* from Wheatland Press and *Dogs in the Moonlight* from Prime Books.

GENE WOLFE began to write in 1956, shortly after he and his wife Rosemary were married. They needed money for a bed and stove. His first sale was "The Dead Man" to *Sir* in 1965. Since then there have been numerous stories and books, including *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Peace*, *The Shadow of the Torturer*, *The Urth of the New Sun*, *There Are Doors*, *Nightside the Long Sun*, *On Blue Waters*, *In Green's Jungles*, and *Return to the Whorl*. His short stories have been collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories*, *Endangered Species*, and *Strange Travelers*. His work has been given three World Fantasy Awards, two Nebula Awards, the British Fantasy Award, the British Science Fiction Award, and the Deathrealm Award, among others. Although it has never won a Hugo Award, his work has been nominated eight times. So far.

MARGARET RONALD was born in rural Indiana and currently lives out side of Boston, Mass. She is an alumni of Viable Paradise VIII and is unfortunatley running out of bookshelf space at the moment.

ERIC DESCHAMPS *(right)* graduated from Syracuse University with a degree in Communication Design but soon afterwards realized that designing graphics for television wasn't satisfying his creative needs. Always an illustrator at heart he decided to finally go that route a few years after college. His first professional illustrations were for *Magic: The Gathering's Unbinged* card set. Since then, he's worked on projects such as *Dungeons & Dragons: Eberron*, Decipher's *WARS TCG* and Fantasy Flight's *A Game of Thrones* among others. His work has also been published in *Spectrum 11* and *Expose 2*.

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DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

Lost breaks out as the cult hit with mass appeal.

If you've been watching *Lost* on ABC, maybe you were perplexed by the cover of a major entertainment magazine that proclaimed *Lost* as "the biggest cult hit since the *X-Files*."

"'Cult hit' is kind of odd," David Fury says, sounding as perplexed as the rest of us. "This is a 'genre' show - I guess it automatically gets cult standing. However, our ratings signify we're a mass hit. So if this is still a cult show, what do you have to do to become a mainstream hit? Get *Desperate Housewives* numbers?"

Even though Fury laughs, the label is peculiar. After all, *Lost* has ranked steadily in the top ten TV ratings. Sure, it was bumped into the top twenty for a couple of weeks when the Red Sox pounded the Yankees and the Cardinals, but that was temporary. As soon as the Sox took their World Series trophy home, *Lost* climbed right back into the top ten, much to the relief of ABC, a network that has faltered mightily during the past few years.

"*Lost, Desperate Housewives*, and *Extreme Home Makeover* have helped to rescue ABC from last place," Fury says.

This isn't the first time he's done his part to breathe life into a network. David Fury was a member of Joss Whedon's team, first on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, then on *Angel*. He's taken a similar role with *Lost*, writing a few episodes while acting as co-executive producer.

"It's not unlike what happened when *Buffy* premiered on the WB," Fury continues. "The WB was the joke network that didn't have any hits that mattered to anybody. At least UPN had the *Star Trek* franchise, but *Buffy* put the WB on the map. The fact that ABC was in desperate need of something, I think it's opened people's minds to the idea of a show that's very different. That's not cookie cutter. I think that's been the death knell for networks for years, just doing new *CSIs* and *Law & Orders*. The fact that people have embraced and the network has found success with shows that are very different, like *Lost*, I think it's great."

If you're not already watching *Lost*, it's a series that's difficult to describe, because it's tough to pin down what's going on. When a plane crashes on a remote island that seems to be in the South Pacific, forty-eight survivors band together and adjust to their new life. Their cell phones don't work. While most of the survivors set up temporary camp on the beach and hope for a quick rescue, a few others learn the outside world doesn't know where they are.

TOP: Kate (Evangeline Lilly) joins a search party heading into the treacherous jungle. ABOVE: The "lost" disembark their dinghy.

Then strange things begin to happen. There seems to be a enormous, invisible monster in the jungle. After finding the cockpit and recovering a transceiver, the survivors pick up a transmission in French that's not only coming from the island but has been repeating in a loop for 16 years. And then there's the polar bear that came charging through the jungle, shot by Sawyer, who stole a gun from a U.S. marshal onboard the plane.

Despite these weird and mysterious elements, ABC originally positioned *Lost* as a drama mimicking

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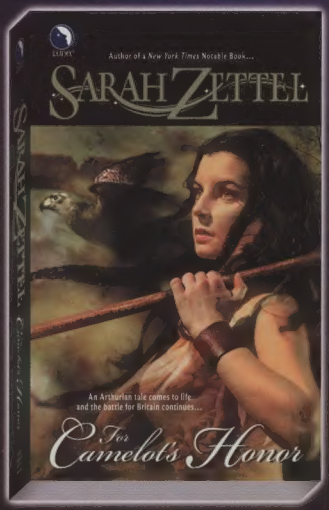
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Rose (L Scott Caldwell) and Charlie (Dominic Monaghan) grieve over the disappearance of a comrade.

reality TV. Initially, there wasn't so much as a peep about supernatural elements.

Fury sighs. "When I came onto the show, the network was very wary of doing any show that was genre related. They had never had any success with anything that was sci-fi or anything occult related. They don't think people want to see them.

"We had to couch the show and the unique elements of the show—be it the polar bear or the French transmission or the invisible monster—in a way that there might be a reasonable explanation for it. Meaning, let's embrace the Scully of the show and not the Mulder. Mulder would have a fantastic explanation for what the monster is, perhaps some greatly evolved dinosaurs that have been living here.

"Is this something out of the ordinary, is it science fictional, or is it something we can explain? Our attempts will often be to try to find the Scully angle to it.

"But are there mystical elements? It's almost a matter of fate. Do you believe there are mystical elements here? Maybe there are. Do you believe the monster is something supernatural? Then maybe it is. By the same token, it might be something we can explain."

After the WB canceled *Angel*, Fury considered his options. While developing his own projects, he considered a range of TV opportunities that came his way. One of the early opportunities was *Lost*. At that time, the pilot hadn't been made and no scripts were available for Fury to read. Feeling that he didn't know enough about the project, he turned it down.

Time passed, and Fury considered more and more projects, rejecting them all. Oddly enough, he heard from the folks at Lost again. Apparently, they'd forgotten that Fury had already turned them down. Fury asked if they had anything they could show him this time, and they sent a copy of the pilot episode.

"I thought it was terrific," Fury says.

He then met with *Lost*'s creators, J.J. Abrams (*Alias*, *Felicity*) and Damon Lindelof (*Crossing Jordan*) at a local Starbucks. After a long chat, Fury signed up.

"We seemed to be on the same page," Fury says. "They wanted me to help figure it out, and it seemed like a fun idea. I put aside my development deals, because I thought shows like this are rare and I should jump on it."

Rare is a good description. At first glance, *Lost* looks like a hybrid of *Gilligan's Island* reruns and *Survivor*. But that impression doesn't last long, thanks to exponentially-growing mysteries. Just when you think one question has been answered, the answer itself can spawn a dozen new questions.

And that's pretty much the point.

In regard to his experience with *Buffy* and *Angel*, Fury says, "We knew what the

FANTASY TV

Although given the green light for a second season, *Tru Calling* vanished without a trace. The highly touted *Father of the Pride*, a computer-animated series striving to grab the attention of Shrek fans, limped away with a whimper. While *Lost* is this season's most intriguing new series, here's how the rest of the season has stacked up:

Revelations (NBC)—Not wanting to be left behind, NBC promises to air this limited series about the Biblical Apocalypse, starring Bill Pullman (*Independence Day*) as a scientist convinced there's a logical explanation for a series of bizarre events. Like a Mulder to his Scully, Natascha McElhone (*The Truman Show*) plays a nun convinced there's a way for them to stop the Apocalypse and preserve humankind's destiny. At press time, NBC reports Revelations is likely to air in March, April, or May.

Desperate Housewives (ABC)—Although many fans argue there's too much soap and not enough fantasy, this is the season's breakout hit.

Medium (NBC)—Putting a new spin on cop shows, this mid-season replacement revolves around a psychic woman who helps solve crime. Patricia Arquette (*Stigmata*) plays real-life profiler Allison DuBois, whose specialty is communicating with spirits of people who have died violently.

Jack & Bobby (WB)—This new series has garnered critical acclaim, telling present-day stories about two boys and their eccentric mom combined with flashes about 40 years into the future after both brothers have died—when one had become the greatest American president of this century.

Ghost Hunters (SCI FI)—Reality TV follows the East Coast investigations of TAPS, a real-life gang of ghost-busters based in Rhode Island. They strive to debunk reported hauntings, so it takes a lot for them to agree there's a ghost in anyone's house.

Joan of Arcadia (CBS)—The second season dared to kill off an important new character, sending ripples through subsequent episodes, as Joan struggles to keep her relationship with God under wraps and her sanity from being questioned.

world was. Here [on *Lost*], we're trying to find our way through it. We're kind of like the survivors themselves, cutting through the thick brush. It's a very different place."

"J.J., frankly, is mostly involved with *Alias* and he's marginally involved with us. But his sensibilities—how he differs from Joss—he's very much into the questions. He's very much into the mysteries. The answers don't interest him as much. He just loves the tantalizing feeling of constantly unfolding layers and having that great unknown at the center. I think that's the exact opposite of Joss. Joss is very much about, 'What's the center?' He knows exactly what it is.

"Which is not to say that we don't know, for instance, what the island is, because we have a lot of those answers. It's a very different environment. Buffy and Angel were all about 'What does this episode mean?' This show is very much about 'What questions does this episode ask?'"

Fury is quick to point out that most people are anxious to know the answers to these questions. (1) When do we find out what the invisible monster is? (2) When do we learn what the island is? and (3) When will the characters understand the meaning of their survival?

And this is where the series takes on a very Zen-like feel. Because questions are more important than answers, the above questions are most likely to be answered as late in the game as possible. Don't hold your breath, because we probably won't get any real answers until the final season, whenever that might happen.

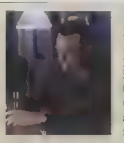
And, frankly, that's what the fun is all about.

"There's going to be people in the audience who are going to feel let down by any answer we give them," Fury points out. "They condemn the answer, because they're much more interested in the mystery."

Putting the mystery aside for a moment, *Lost* parallels *Buffy* and *Angel* in two interesting ways. First, we learn about characters through flashbacks, much like the "origin" episodes of Whedon's series, like "Fool For Love," when we learn how a nerdy young man named William was transformed into a vampire named Spike.

Each *Lost* episode weaves the ongoing story of the survivors with a flashback that focuses on a different character each week. The flight of the crashed plane originated in Australia, so it's common to learn why each character had come to or was leaving Australia. We learn that Jack (Matthew Fox) is an American doctor who came to Australia in search of his missing, alcoholic father. Kate (Evangeline Lilly) had been tracked down and arrested in Australia and, unknown to her fellow passengers, was wearing handcuffs on the plane. Charlie (Dominic Monaghan) is a has-been rock star with a drug addiction that he's forced to kick without an ongoing supply. And so on. All in all, *Lost* gives us over a dozen significant characters to get to know.

"We have come to a paradigm that works for us and we like," Fury says. "That is, the episodes focusing on individual characters, telling anthology stories about them in the episode while furthering the mysteries and the mythology of the island and the survivors. That seems to be a great paradigm, but it's a pattern that doesn't match any



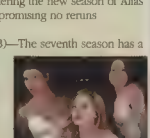
Huff (Showtime)—Hank Azaria (*The Birdcage*) plays a psychiatrist battling his own problems that sometimes crop up in fantasy sequences in this new series.

Proof Positive (SCI FI)—Using a mix of investigative techniques, this show proves or disproves real-life *X Files* cases.

Smallville (WB)—Season four brought Clark to Metropolis, devastated after accidentally destroying his parents' farm and vulnerable to the personality-altering power of red kryptonite.

Alias (ABC)—Using a technique that worked for series like *24*, ABC chose to hold off premiering the new season of Alias until January, promising no reruns.

Charmed (WB)—The seventh season has a family-values flavor with a focus on children, paternity, parenting, and looking for Mr. Right. ❧



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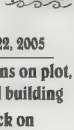

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Kate (Evangeline Lilly) and Jack (Matthew Fox) try and resuscitate an abducted Charlie (Dominic Monaghan)

other show I can think of

"It's unproved territory. To try and do a show about a group of survivors on an island with mysterious elements—I can't think of another show that's like this. You could always point to *Buffy* and say, 'Well, it's *My So-Called Life* with vampires. It's a coming-of-age story about a young girl going through the pains of high school and growing up.' But *Lost*—I can't point to anything that this feels like. So, consequently, there's a little more unsure footing, to be perfectly honest, in starting the show up."

The other way in which *Lost* parallels *Buffy* and *Angel* is a certain fearlessness in killing off characters.

The pilot episode made this clear when, in the first few minutes of the show, a male survivor walks past the plane's engine which has crashed on the beach. The engine is still working, the man walks too close—and he gets sucked into the engine right before our disbelieving eyes. And that's not even counting the dozens of passengers who died in the crash.

When a handful of survivors find the cockpit in the jungle, the pilot reveals he turned the plane around with the intent of landing in Fiji, but they're 1000 miles off course. Whoever's looking for them is looking in the wrong place. Then the pilot is yanked out of the plane and killed by the invisible monster.

The man who was in charge of Kate's arrest dies. One of the women—a good swimmer with a solid understanding of riptides—goes out for a swim and the ocean drags her away.

We began with 48 survivors, and at press time we're down to 44.

Then there's Ethan, a character whose name isn't on the plane's manifesto. He kidnaps two survivors, drags them through the jungle, and warns Jack that if he continues to track them, Ethan will kill one of them. When Jack ignores the warning, he finds Charlie hanging from a tree and is barely able to bring him back to life.

It was a heart-stopping moment. Be forewarned. *Lost* will not hesitate to kill off characters–even important characters.

"Our intent has always been to thin out the herd," Fury says. "But as we tell stories about them, it becomes more and more difficult. We say, 'We have so many more stories we could tell with them. Do we really want to kill this person now?' We're dragging our feet a little bit. We aren't killing as much as we professed we'd be killing people. But we will. People will eventually die, maybe very late in the season or next season.

"But right now we have no one slated. We kept having people slated, but then we'd change our minds. Or an actor would think, 'I'd love a death scene.' But then we'd say, 'But you're so interesting.' And he'd go, 'Yeah. You know what? I'm having fun.' What's great is when you can let the stories tell you who should die. Who would give us the most emotional impact in that moment? Who would be the most shocking? Those are things to look at in the future."

Fury pauses and laughs. "I don't want to promise anything because I might wind up killing somebody in my next episode."

It's been five years since *Survivor* premiered and launched the wave of reality TV. Considering that *Lost* bears a superficial resemblance to *Survivor* but layers on the prospect of killing characters stranded on a very mysterious island, is there any chance we've come full circle?

"I'd love to think so," Fury says. "I'm personally not a fan of reality television. I've really tried to be. I try to watch them, but they just don't work for me. They don't have the same emotional impact. They seem more fake and unconvincing, which is ironic, that reality seems more unconvincing than some of the fiction that's scripted TV. The fact is, that scripted TV like *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost* and even *CSI*, those are things are doing well. And shows like The Bachelor seem to be on the wane, if I can knock something on ABC.

"Of all the challenges, the greatest challenge is in making the story last. All series want to run for many years. They want to provide everyone with many years of enjoyment and have a franchise. And this show, because of its uniqueness, invites all sorts of limitations. You can't do the crime of the week or the law case of the week or the medical dilemma of the week.

"*Lost*, by virtue of its enormous cast, its many points of view, its landscape of a seemingly deserted island—all of those

Josh Holloway stars in the role of "Sawyer"

things create a vast, open world that we can explore but that actually makes it more difficult to find the story. I wish I could tell you that even though we know a lot of aspects of the island, because we have to put them off for so long, because once we tell every one, it changes the show—we have to figure out another way to drive these stories. Right now I think it works just fine in introducing these people and what their back stories are and filling in those blanks of those pieces of the puzzle. I think it's going to be great. But as we talk about season two and season three and season four, it becomes much more challenging."

Unfortunately, Fury's days on *Lost* are already numbered. He has committed to *Lost* for two seasons, but then he's likely to work on his own projects.

"I had a home with *Buffy* and *Angel* for seven years," Fury says. "I don't think I'm looking for another home. That was a wonderful experience. I don't think I'll ever get one as good as that again. And I don't think *Lost* or any show can be that for me." ❧

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By Kristen McDermott

Superstition has been an integral part of Western theater throughout the ages.

why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at its ribs,
Against the use of nature?
(*Macbeth*, 1.3.133-6)

If at any time you find yourself starved for attention, simply wander into the backstage area of any theater in the English-speaking world. Start to chant "Double, double, toil and trouble," or perhaps simply shout the word "Macbeth" at the top of your lungs. You will instantly be surrounded by actors and stagehands, frantically shushing you and maybe even trying to push you out the door. Once outside, you must do several things: you must turn around three times, spit over your left shoulder, and either (1) say the filthiest word you know, (2) say "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!", or (3) speak a line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Then you must wait to be invited back into the theater. Only then will the dread Curse of the Scottish Play be reversed.

Anyone who has studied *Macbeth* in high school or college has heard of the Curse of the Scottish Play—or "the Plaid Play"—or simply, "That Play." In fact, it officially entered the elite ranks of pop culture last year in an episode of *The Simpsons*. America's most beloved animated family visited England and met Sir Ian McKellen as he rehearsed "That Play." Of course, the Simpsons' incessant mentioning of "Macbeth" onstage results in the hapless Sir Ian's being struck by, among other things, lightning and a scaffold.

Productions of *Macbeth* have historically (it is claimed) been beset with disaster: accidents both onstage and off, from actors gouged and maimed during the many sword fights in the play, to friends and relatives of theater people struck with sudden, unexplained ailments during the run of the show, to the bizarre offstage deaths of actors and directors connected with Macbeth productions. The explanations for these occurrences are long and complex, ranging from the purely supernatural to the purely practical. *Macbeth* is cursed, some argue, because its depictions of witchcraft rituals invite evil spirits into the space of the theater. Others claim that the curse is the cumulative result of random bad fortune over 400 years of performances, creating a backstage atmosphere of nervousness and tension that invites danger. More pragmatic people suggest that the play is plagued with bad luck simply because any production that features lots of swordplay and special effects with smoke and flames will suffer more than its share of accidents.

A company of strolling players prepares for its final performance in Hogarth's classic Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn.

One thing is certain: Professional theater people respect the curse, whether they literally believe in it or not. Actors have traditionally had a hearty respect for the unseen forces at work in the world, perhaps because their own livelihood depends so much on luck, illusion, and a deep connection with the darkest recesses of human emotion. This may also be the reason why the world of the theater is densely packed with superstitions and ghost stories.

Here are some things that actors never do:

- Whistle backstage.
- Say "good luck!" to one another.
- Speak the last line of the play (the "tag") in rehearsal.

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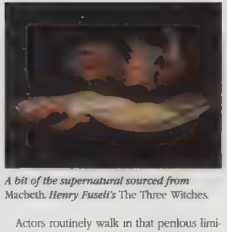
- Peek through the curtain to see the audience
- Leave hats on dressing room beds or shoes on the floor

Of course, some of these superstitions have perfectly logical origins. When the lights and curtains were operated by teams of stagehands manipulating hundreds of heavy bars and sandbags backstage, they used the sailors' language of whistles and handclaps to communicate with one another. Any ill-timed whistle could bring a half-ton curtain down on your head! Having a distracted fellow actor sit on one's elaborate stage hat because it was lying on the chaise in your dressing room would also be a bad thing. But many stage superstitions seem much more obscure.

Actors share the tendency to be superstitious with other professionals who regularly perform complicated and physically risky tasks—soldiers, sailors, miners, athletes, pilots, rescuers. The theater is also an intensely oral institution. Even though plays begin as written words, that part of the production is abandoned as early in the rehearsal process as possible, and the spoken word takes over. Live theaters also share many elements with other ritual spaces such as churches and sports stadiums: a company acts and speaks regularly in front of an ever-changing audience, supported by unseen artists and workers "back stage," doing something slightly differently each time, but striving for a repetition of whatever magic has brought the audience to them in the first place. In fact, church services resemble theater performances for the simple reason that the professional theater in Europe began as religious drama, and the first stage actors were, literally, priests re-creating the Apostles' approach of the to the tomb of Christ during Easter Mass.

The anthropologist Victor Turner, in *From Ritual to Theater*, links the "per" of *experience*, *experiment*, and *performance* to the Indo-European root meaning "to attempt, venture, risk," and suggests the key root is the Greek *perao*, which he translates as "perilous passage" or "rite of passage." He suggests that dramtic performers are really experimenting with ways to represent human experience. All drama, many scholars believe, has its origins in rites of passage used by societies to mark human transitional, or *liminal*, experiences: birth, death, marriage, puberty, etc. These interstitial moments—moments of movement from one state of being to another—are so important in human lives that they must be frozen in time, examined, honored, and preserved through the repetition of rituals. The presentation of a newborn baby to its community, the procession of a bride among her friends and relatives, the solemn display of the body of a departed person—all are rituals that stage our most important and intimate passages for public view.



A bit of the supernatural sourced from Macbeth. *Henry Fusseli's* The Three Witches.

Actors routinely walk in that perilous liminal space between reality and fantasy, life and death, comedy and tragedy. The actor who regularly "puts on" the emotions, voice, and identity of someone else—someone who doesn't even exist, frequently—puts her soul in danger of losing its way in the unseen boundary between the real and the unreal. Mirrors are unlucky on stage, and not merely because they can dangerously reflect stage lights into actors' eyes. Folk superstitions abound with tales of mirrors reflecting ghosts or demons; an old story about a performance of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* has the Devil himself entering through a handy onstage mirror to dance with the stage devils, frightening the lead actor to death.

Small wonder they're a bit superstitious.

The really interesting superstitions are the ones whose origins are so shrouded in mystery that the actors themselves don't know why they perform them. Take, for instance, the belief that it's unlucky to tell an actor "good luck" before s/he goes onstage. Instead, actors say "Break a leg!" Why a leg? Why not just say "Bad luck!"?

There are a number of speculations. Some relate the expression to "making a leg" or taking a deep bow—the wish is that the actor should get so much applause that many bows would become necessary. Another, somewhat labored guess relates to stage scenery—the curtains at the side of the stage are called "legs," so an actor that has to take so many bows that the curtains become worn out from being raised and lowered can be said to have "broken" the legs of the stage.

Two historical theories are related to famous actors. Some say the expression originated after the immortal Sarah Bernhardt returned to acting after having her leg amputated, which seems macabre. Others invoke the famous incident in which John Wilkes Booth leaped onto the Ford Theater stage to scream "Sic semper tyrannus!" after murdering President Lincoln, breaking his leg in the process. But that seems to bode no good to actors or audience members.

The most likely explanation is also the simplest. Almost every culture has a form of ritual reversals designed to fool evil spirits. Parents of lovely children loudly complain about how ugly their children are, or dress them in old clothing, lest the fairies want to steal them. Therefore, to wish someone bad luck of a particularly immediate and personal kind counteracts the envy of any theatrical goblins who might wish to mar an actor's performance. Similarly, many actors believe that certain things bring good luck—having one's shoes squeak during the first entrance on stage, or even better, to fall on one's face. This is another example of offering a small sacrifice—however inadvertently—in return for a blessing. The belief that the gods or the fates are jealous of perfection may also be behind such superstitions—many actors refuse to speak the last line of a play (particularly a new play) until the opening night, in the belief that a completed or "perfect" play will invite supernatural punishment.

Such small acts of appeasement are deeply sourced in faerie lore, which peeks through theater superstitions frequently; the color green is avoided on stage, not only because it is difficult to light attractively, but because it is the faeries' most beloved color and will provoke their jealousy if worn by an actor. Some actors pinch their fellow performers for luck—perhaps a nod to the fairy pinches that punish transgressors.

What's interesting is the way that false etymologies for superstitions (like the Booth/Bernhardt "break a leg" stories) tend to crop up when the folkroots become lost

Further Reading

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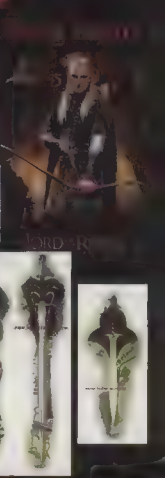

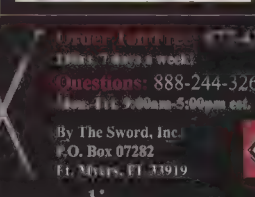

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A classic scene from Shakespeare's Hamlet *as portrayed by Henry Fuseli in* Hamlet and the Ghost.

or suppressed. That rule about whistling backstage, for example. The explanation about riggers' signals is logical and satisfying, but English actors—many of whom were themselves rural folk who brought their folkways to the big city—may also have been aware of the Cornish saying about the devil. "Whistle and I'll come to you!"

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or a goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs of heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee

(Hamlet 1 4 20-25)

But in certain professions, particularly ones so rich in oral and performed tradition, the folkways can never really disappear. The perennial hauntedness of theaters is another example of this. Almost every theater features a "ghost light" a light kept perpetually burning on stage, regardless of whether anyone is in the building. Some of the most famous ghosts reside in the opulent West End theaters of London, most notably The Man in Grey at the Drury Lane. Reports of his appearances date back more than 200 years, and the only hint as to who he might have been was the discovery, in 1850, of a hidden chamber that housed a skeleton with a dagger plunged between its ribs, surrounded by gold and playing cards. The burial of the bones in consecrated ground, however, did not stop the Man in Grey's appearances. Richard Huggett, author of *Theatrical Superstitions*, reports having seen him in 1973. His appearance, of course, is considered very lucky, especially if he shows up during rehearsals.

No performing space, be it ever so humble, is without its resident ghost. Even a space as mundane as the theater in which I worked backstage at Six Flags Over Georgia—the Crystal Pistol, a glorified auditorium in which energetic young performers sang and danced each summer to canned country-western music—had a ghost. I was solemnly informed immediately after starting work as a costume technician that the men's dressing room was haunted by the ghost of a teen dancer who had died in a car crash on his way to rehearsal some years before. I learned the next year that a friend who performed at Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey had heard the same story at *her* theater.

It's no surprise that theaters are haunted. Ghosts are usually believed to be the revenants of the unsettled dead, attracted to a place in which they were either very happy or very sad. The twin masks of comedy and tragedy that grace many theater proscenium arches attest to the extremes of joy and sorrow that are enacted nightly in that confined space; the intense emotional energy released both onstage and off must be like catnip for ghosts.

Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe

(*Hamlet* 1 5.95-7)

Not just ghosts but spirits of every kind are attracted to the magical realm of the theater. The activities that take place there are directly related to the most ancient of mysteries: invocation of the spirits to possess the bodies of the shamanic celebrant so that hidden truths might be revealed to general witnesses. Many of the early attackers of the professional theater were particularly concerned for the spiritual well-being of the actors themselves. To take on the personality of another person, especially someone of the opposite sex (as was the case for the boy actors of Shakespeare's theater), was to become like the shape-shifting Greek demigod Proteus, a sneaky, disloyal "chameleon" of little blood and no virtue. When Shakespeare's Hamlet puts on an "antic disposition" to fly under the treacherous Claudius's radar, he runs the risk of becoming truly mad; in many productions, his performance becomes reality and he nearly loses his sanity in the quest for the truth. He certainly has lost everything he ever loved by the tragic finale of the play.

It's no coincidence that Shakespeare makes Hamlet a longtime friend of the theater. His decision to "play" mad immediately precedes a scene in which he recites a long speech from *Dido and Aeneas* in front of the traveling actors. Hamlet is a frustrated actor; his choice to expose Claudius's murderous guilt in the public form of a play is a vain one. It backfires, and Hamlet endangers the life of his friends, his mother, and his lover. By choosing Acting over acting, Hamlet works at cross-purposes to himself. But that's to be expected—"We're actors," says the Player King in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a brilliant re-imagining of *Hamlet*; "we're the opposite of people."

The actor also fills the role of the "contrary" in folk culture—the person who says or does the opposite of what social norms deem appropriate, and who thereby serves as an outlet for social tensions (the Native American Mudhead clowns, for example, or the "licensed fool" of European courts). The actor holds a mirror up to the audience, showing us our best and worst selves, and thus embodies contranness in all its forms. For this reason, many theatrical superstitions mischievously embrace the more common bad-luck superstitions—theaters welcome and even seek out resident black cats, for example, and American theaters often raise the curtain 13 minutes after the hour, to guarantee a cheerful and responsive audience.

The shamanistic roots of the actor come through in the many superstitions that involve animals. Peacock feathers with their iridescent "eye" at the end—are absolutely anathema to any stage production. One famous designer who accidentally included a peacock panel in a stage design had to paint over them and change them to turkeys! The anti-peacock sentiment may be related to the common complaints against actors and their tremendous vanity, or it may be an older reflection of the association of peacocks and the goddess Juno—a goddess famously, and destructively, jealous of her philandering husband Jove's habit of disguising himself and conducting trysts with mortal women. Most likely, though, it is a holdover from the Mediterranean fear of the "evil eye." Romany artists in particular carried an aversion to peacock feathers with them.

Cats, as aforementioned, are welcome theatrical tenants, not only because they keep the backstage area free of costume-nibbling mice, costumers routinely insist that

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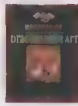

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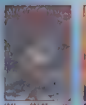

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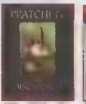

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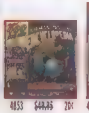

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the garment they have labored over isn't really a "costume" until a cat has slept on it Cats are such good luck, in fact, that the discovery of cat droppings in one's dressing room is a blessed event. The only "bad luck" superstition associated with cats is having one walk on stage during a performance, but considering how animals "steal focus," that isn't surprising

These are daily types of superstitions, shared by actors in every theater in the Western world. They form a part of the oral tradition that offers this nomadic and precarious world a sense of stability and homeyness Although theater buildings are occupied by an ever changing array of performers and technicians, their ghosts give them a consistent identity, a form of continuity For actors whose lives are often lonely and fragmented, encountering the same oral traditions as they travel from one theater to the next is a source of comfort

The causes of superstition are-pleasing and sensual rites and ceremonies, ... over-great reverence of traditions, .. the taking an aim at divine natures by human, which cannot but breed mixture of imaginations, and lastly, barbarous times, especially joined with calamities and disasters (Francis Bacon, "Of Superstition," *The Essays*, 1625)

Of course, the granddaddy of all theatrical superstitions is unique in that it focuses on a single play—not on theatrical life in general—and that it is heeded by performers who have never and will never perform in the play in question Fears about the "Scottish Play" reputedly date back to its first performance in 1606 There's a tradition that the first theater historian, John Aubrey, who interviewed a number of Shakespeare's fellow actors in their old age, said that Hal Berridge, the boy actor cast as the first Lady Macbeth, contracted a fever and died the night of the first performance There's no written evidence of this story, but tradition insists it was in his notes

More well-documented disasters abound An actor playing Macbeth in 1672 was said to have murdered the actor playing Duncan offstage, using his stage dagger A revival of the play in 1703 was accompanied by a legendary tempest in London. One of the worst disasters occurred in America in 1849, when a long-standing feud between the actors William Charles Macready and Edwin Forrest resulted in a riot outside the Astor Theater, where fans of Forrest protested an appearance of Macready in the role of Macbeth The crowd swelled to 20,000, forcing the militia to fire, killing 23 people Other actors, including Laurence Olivier, Charlton Heston, and John Gielgud, have suffered injuries or near misses during productions of the play. And the most recent famous victim was television's Kelsey Grammar, who was critically eviscerated—in print, at least—for his Broadway portrayal of the Scottish King. It closed after (*cue eerie music*) thirteen performances

The Victorian actress Ellen Terry, here immortalized by John Singer Sargent in her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, was by her own admission not particularly superstitious, but was also famous for forgetting her lines at crucial moments.

Shakespeare scholars are puzzled as to why *Macbeth*, of all the blood-soaked tragedies of the era, should be the one singled out for unluckiness Tradition holds that the play's depictions of witches' rituals have brought down its numerous curses, but other witchcraft plays of the era (*Sophonisba*, *The Witch*, *The Masque of Queens*) have similar dark ceremonies acted

Kally Jo Surbeck

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out in detail To blame "witchcraft" or the devil for the play's troubles is to assume a particularly pious mindset—something actors are rarely known for possessing Actors may rightly worry about offending the fates or the faeries, but in the time of Shakespeare, most people accused of witchcraft were known even to the famously superstitious King James—to be charlatans and posers (professional kin to actors) rather than actual practitioners of Dark Arts

O proper stuff!
This is the very painting of your fear.
This is the air-drawn dagger
(*Macbeth* 3.4.59-61)

Other scholars point pragmatically to the many violent swordfights and smoky special effects the plays contain, but *Hamlet* and the history plays are equally full of sword play and walking ghosts. In fact, skeptical theater historians argue that just as many actors have come to grief during the swordfights in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear* They also point out that theatrical troupes, always operating on the cusp of financial ruin, frequently pull out the crowd-pleasing Macbeth as a last resort when they need some ready cash Not surprisingly, the Scottish Play is then the last play a company performs before going under Other pragmatic theories suggest that the play's popularity results in longer than-usual runs, during which time, according to the laws of probability, *something* is bound to go wrong

Huggett suggests that *Macbeth* alone of all Shakespeare's plays presents an atmosphere of menace and gloom unrelieved by any virtuous characters (like *Hamlet*'s Horatio or *Othello*'s Desdemona) at all but the same could be said of the cynical tragicomedies of John Ford and Thomas Middleton

I believe the curse has roots that are both deeper and multisourced. Theater is, as I've noted, a ritual art with deep connections to shamanic practice The actor calls powerful forces into being with the use of her body voice, and mind She literally transcends time, pulling the thoughts and words of long dead writers from the page and embodying them A good actor, of course, is able to convincingly portray any emotion or action regardless of his personal state of mind at the time, but it seems reasonable that, if an actor rehearses, prepares, and performs a role convinced—for whatever reason—that he is calling particular forces into being, he will make himself a conduit for whatever energies he invokes Thus is not to blame the victim—no actor deserves to be skewered onstage or to literally break a leg—but actors know all too well that they are tempting fate every time they walk onto a stage In most cases, the worst an actor is likely to suffer is personal embarrassment

In rare, cases, however, the price for invoking the power of Fate is far more deadly The three "witches" in *Macbeth* are

not actually witches at all, but embodiments of the Three Fates of Greek mythology. No other drama in English has dared to give the Fates faces and voices. Macbeth calls them the "weird sisters," which is a version of "wyrd," the Anglo-Saxon word for Fate. They are also associated in the play with their leader, Hecate, herself a personification of the Triple Goddess, the triune maiden, mother, and crone, who themselves are another way of picturing Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the Moirae who spin, measure, and cut the human thread of life. The Fates are also sisters to the Eumenides, ironically called by all who fear them the Kindly Ones (and like the Scottish Play, they are not to be named!)—the terrible Furies who hunt down kin-slayers.

Macbeth, when he meets the three "witches," meets all these figures in one. His great tragedy is that he believes himself immune to the law of fate, but in drama, at least, all murderers must face the consequences of their deeds. He has murdered his own king, a crime worse than kin slaying, so he therefore brings the wrath of the Furies upon himself. Most horribly, he insults the Triple goddess in a number of ways: he breaks the line of primogeniture by murdering a king and taking the throne from his sons; he also orders the murders of not one but two sets of parents and children, and he believes and boasts of the witches' prophecy that he cannot be killed by any man "of woman born." The Furies have the last laugh, however, when they send Duncan, a man "untimely ripp'd" from his mother's womb (by Caesarean), to finally face down Macbeth.

No other play in English has the Fates personally preside over their own workings. Small wonder that no other play in English inspires such fear in those who, like Macbeth, take on a role perhaps too great for any human to fill. Many folk fear witches, devils, and Fate, but only actors are ever expected to take on their forms. The shape-shifting faery Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—one of the first, but by no means the last, actor-characters Shakespeare wrote—assures his audience as his fellow-fairies bless the stage, that no real spirits have been called down:

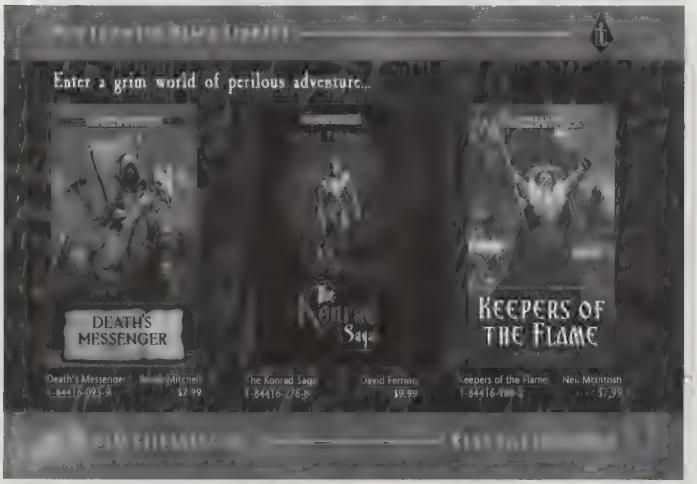
> *If these shadows have offended,*
> *Think but this, and all is mended*
> *That you have but slumbered here*
> *While these visions did appear.*
> *And this weak and idle theme,*
> *No more yielding but a dream*
>
> (Epilogue,1-6)

His later counterpart, the master-director Prospero, similarly acknowledges the dangers of theatrical illusion, as he prepares to reject his magical profession and re-enter the "real" world:

> *These our actors,*
> *As I foretold you, were all spirits, and*
> *Are melted into air, into thin air*
> *And like the baseless fabric of this vision*
> *The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces*
> *The solemn temples, yea, the great globe itself,*
> *Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,*
> *And, like this insubstantial pageant faded*
> *Leave not a rack behind.*
>
> (*The Tempest*, 4.1 148-56)

Both these characters acknowledge, at the beginning and end of Shakespeare's career, that the stage is a unique space. It calls into being unseen powers and gives unseen beings "a local habitation and a name." As such, it presents the danger of contagion both to those who are on it and those who watch it—a danger so great, in fact, that both Prospero and Puck take great pains to assure us that we can, that we *must*, protect ourselves by remembering that stage illusions are only dreams.

The tremendous irony of dramatic art is that the more complete the illusion of reality, the more powerful the emotional and spiritual experience that is created. Actors knowing that to create such a paradox is to perpetually—and beautifully—disturb the numinous fabric of reality, comfort and strengthen themselves with a rich tapestry of oral traditions and personal rituals. They are referred to as "theatrical superstitions," but they are more properly part of the complex spiritual world of the professional theater, which is itself a descendent of our oldest and most sacred rituals. ❧



By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

Folk ballads of years past undergo a modern make over.

A genuinely unique departure, and an effective spur for anyone looking for heretofore unexamined treasure zones in the realms of fantasy, ***The Book of Ballads*** A Tom Doherty Associates Book New York Trade Hardcover, 192 pp., $24.95) is a gathering up of a thirteen wildly imaginative traditional British folk ballads very cleverly adapted by divers talented authors into the graphic arts form and lavishly illustrated by Charles Vess

The reader may plunge right into the book proper if he or she is so inclined but I would strongly recommend first consulting the excellent foreword by Terri Windling, as it's not only a fine mood setter for what follows, but it most decidedly deepens one's ability to approach these genuinely fabulous folk songs with eyes wider open than they otherwise might be

Modeled after Tolkien's masterpiece The Lord of the Rings, The Wizard Knight *is an epic fantasy that has been published in two separate volumes*

Other useful aids include having the original ballad printed after the adaptation so that the reader may turn into a singer if she or he so desires (I confess I would have like to have seen the basic melody written down for this purpose!) The introduction has a swell little list of suggestions for further background reading on the subject matter, and there is a very well done discography at the end of the volume by Ken Rosemen which may well set a number of you off on a whole new, and likely, highly rewarding hobby

The collection starts off with a wonderfully witty adaptation by Neil Gaimen of *The False Knight of the Road* wherein a wee boy has a very tense encounter with the False Knight beside a haunted well The boy is smartly dressed in a snappy little Victorian outfit with a jacket and cap and stands his ground so well before the knight—who frighteningly chooses to resemble the boy's drowned father—that the nasty creature increasingly spouts flames from his beard and hair until he is finally, and very satisfactorily, entirely consumed by his own fire. The brave wee boy is then freed to go on his way

The second ballad, *King Henry* is adapted by Jane Yolen and is a glonously unabashed rendering of how Henry VIII—out of knightly courtesy worthy of a great king—fed a monstrously gigantic "lady from hell" his hunting horse and hounds to sate her hunger, gave her a cellarful of wine to quench her thirst, bedded her enormous, hairy body well and long enough to satisfy her lust; and then tells us all what happened after that

And these are just for starters

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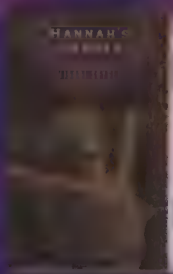

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—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

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And Bless Mr Vess for so beautifully presenting us with this careful selection.

May this only be the first.

The Dry Salvages (Subterranean Press, Burton MI, Deluxe Hardcover,121 pp., $25.00) marks the first time in a long time that Caitlin R. Kiernan has wandered off from the superb contemporary gothics she has been writing of late and returned to her truly dark brand of science fiction she started off with. I'm thoroughly delighted she has, for this is a fine offering.

It's a very short novel but this book covers much ground and will leave a good many more new notions in the reader's mind than many well intentioned authors can manage to do in an entire trilogy, or tetrology, or whatever.

The heroine is Audrey Cather, a leading expert in exopaleontology (I must admit I'm very fond of this term and intend to drop it unexpectedly at parties) who is, at the time of writing this memoir, an old lady living on a lecturer's salary and an agency pension, along with three cats in a Paris apartment frozen by a worldly climate which has changed very much for the worst.

She has a good view of *Ile Saint Louis* through the thick permaclear windows but she draws the curtains on cloudless nights because she has become an astrophobic, which means that she suffers from a morbid fear of stars and other celestial bodies as a consequence of a what happened when, in her prime as an adventurous scientist, she was a member of a now legendary expedition of the ship *Montelius* to the red moon Piros which even now continues to orbit a gas giant circling the red dwarf Gliese 876 in the constellation Aquarius.

One of the most interesting things about the author's return to science fiction from the gothic mode is that that even though the story is pure science fiction in every sense of the word and follows all the rules, it uses those rules to (as Howard Phillips Lovecraft did, albeit in a subtly different fashion) show that science fiction can, quite scientifically, be very spooky.

Early on, one of the characters dismisses the ghastly events which occurred in the expedition (which unwisely decided to make its crew withstand the psychological pressure of the horribly long journey from star to star awake and not in a coma) by describing them as "spook stories for travelers." Then, much later, at a peak point of horror towards the climax of the *Montelius*'s expedition, a character observes, "We're inside a ghost story now, aren't we?"

Kiernan has a lot of skillful fun with all sorts of science fiction basics. She creates, for instance, an excellent slang word: "Bray." This is likely drolly derived from a mule's bray and is a wryish way of saying "first rate" or "great." It is used with increasing irony as the story progresses.

A major science fiction game played by Kiernan is the introduction of the synths, androids developed to such a considerable degree that there many confusions, apparently among both synths and humans, as to how different they really are and these confusions grow subtly darker in a very intriguing way as the story moves along.

The climax towards which *The Dry Salvages* moves in its excellently doomish way could be described, I suppose, as "post-Lovecraftian" and I suspect H.P.L. would have admired it and the story's heroine—an "old lady" very much like the sort of "old gentleman" he liked to style himself—very, very much.

Highly entertaining, beautifully written and, take it from me, it'll give you the genuine creeps!

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror; Seventeenth Annual Collection (St Martin's, Griffin New York, hardcover, 564 pp., $19.95) is once again the absolute must have collection for fantasy and horror buffs, the appropriately-named collection comes along to dazzle, inform, and mightily entertain.

Terri Windling has gone off to other enterprises as she warned us she would, and her place has been bravely taken by Kelly Link and Gavin J. Grant, but Ellen Datlow, bless her doughty heart, soldiers on, along with Edward Bryant on media, Charles Vess on comics and graphic novels, Joan D. Vinge on anime and manga, Charles de Lint on music of the fantastic and James Frenkel fulfilling his doleful but ever so necessary duties on obituaries. That and the usual superb anthology of stories and poems rounded off with their traditional list of honorable mentions and you have $19.95 bringing you much, much more than it does anywhere else in this dismal day of the dolefully diminishing dollar. Frankly, I can't see that you have any other option but to go out there right now and buy it, so do it.

Bad Magic (Tor, New York, hardcover, 251 pp., $23.95) makes it somewhat obvious that it is a first novel because I'm absolutely sure nobody would ever have anywhere near enough energy left over to ever write another as totally over the top and as unrelenting in its frantic *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies* pace as this wild saga after having written 0one first. It just would not be humanly possible.

But then I suppose there is always the possibility that this Zielinski fellow isn't human since his outlook does have clearly alien overtones.

The basic premise of the book, that the bulk of humanity is lost in a muzzy dream and in total denial about the realities of day to day life, is definitely rock solid, but the author's contention that people who cannot open their third eye are unable to accept and therefore instantly reject things that don't make any sense whatsoever (such as a bunch of shore patrol cops being attacked by a pack of resurrected, mummified dogs with surgically implanted armor, for instance) strikes me as being on somewhat shaky ground since my observation is that people tend to believe things that don't make sense much more fervently than anything that does, but let's let that slide.

The book concerns a likable crew of occult eccentrics who are basically extremely kindly types (it isn't everyday you run across the sort of person who will sneak into a hospital and gently pull pain worms out of you at great personal risk to themselves) and how they become aware of a humongous threat to humanity (the Zombi-Diego) and how, at totally unrelenting break neck speed, and always in the present tense, they go to a great deal of trouble trying to save humanity from the depredations of the above-mentioned Zombi-Diego, not to mention a lot of other nasty stuff.

I have no idea what Mr Zielinski will write after this book, supposing writing this book has not finished him off, but *Bad Magic* displays a wacky outlook which I found entertaining, and makes a great number of genuinely funny jokes. As a result, I think he deserves encouragement and am happy to hereby officially offer it to him.

Let's see what happens next.

Gahan Wilson

The Wizard, Book Two of The Wizard Knight, Gene Wolfe, TOR, New York, hard-

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DARK PLANET

CHARLES W. SASSER

Kadar San, a human-Zentador crossbreed distrusted by both humans and Zentadon, is dispatched with a Deep Reconnaissance Team (DRT) to the Dark Planet of Aldenia. His mission: use his telepathic powers to sniff out a Blob assault base preparing to attack the Galaxia Republic. Dominated by both amazing insect and reptile life forms, and by an evil and mysterious Presence, Aldenia was once a base for the warlike Indowy who used their superior technology to enslave the Zentadon and turn them into super warriors to destroy against humans.

The DRT comes under attack not only from savage denizens of the Dark Planet, but also from the mysterious Presence, which turns team member against team member and all against Kadar San. The Presence promises untold wealth and power to any member of the team unscrupulous enough to unleash the contents of a Pandora's box like remnant of Indowy technology. The box's possessor poses a greater threat than the entire Blob nation, for he is capable of [illegible] around the galaxy.

Kadar San [illegible] pitted against a human killer, an expert sniper, is a desperate struggle to save both the Republic and the human female he has come to love. Like all Zentadon, however, Kadar San cannot kill without facing destruction himself in the process. And he has no choice but to kill. In order to save the galaxy, Kadar San must face the truth ... No one will leave the Dark Planet.

April 2005 ISBN# 1-932815-13-9

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Medallion Press

cover, 480 pp., $25.95, ISBN 0-765-31201-8.

Like Tolkien's masterpiece, which is its model, Gene Wolfe's *The Wizard Knight* was written as a single work, and it is not authorial intent but the exigencies of publishing that are responsible for its having been split into separate volumes. Those who approve of courtesy (at least) to living authors will read *The Wizard Knight* as Wolfe intended it. Even if you've already read *The Knight*, go back and read it again before starting on *The Wizard*. You'll be glad you did. Because even less than is normally the case with Wolfe's fictions does this immensely rich work follow a straightforward plot that can be easily parsed in space and time, much less within the bounds of a review. It is a fractured fairy tale, set in a universe where there are seven spheres of existence, hierarchically arranged from smallest to grandest, foulest evil to purest good, least to most real, and so on, with the smaller encapsulated within the larger, and time running at different rates in each (they are, respectively: Niflheim, Muspel, Aelfrice, Mythgarthr, Skai, Kleos, and Elysion). Adding to the confusion, many pieces of the puzzle of story and setting are missing due to the narrator's lost memories, absence from crucial events, or plain ignorance. At first glance, it may seem strange that a conservative writer like Wolfe should employ such artifices of modernism and post modernism as the unreliable narrator and fractured narrative. Yet I believe that Wolfe, like the narrator of *The Wizard Knight*, strives to tell his stories as simply and honestly as he is able, and that the various lacunae in his fictions are representations of less-than-perfect beings existing in a less than-perfect universe–both of which, nonetheless, contain traces of the perfect being that created them. Readers need not share Wolfe's Catholic faith to find his fiction rewarding, but they will be missing a lot if they do not make an effort to understand that faith and its centrality to his work. Everything in Wolfe, from art to politics, must be viewed through the lens of faith. I no longer believe that Wolfe is writing fantasy or science fiction in any meaningful sense. He is crafting sophisticated religious fables that wrestle with some of the deepest mysteries of Christianity.

The Knight introduced readers to Sir Able of the High Heart, a teenage boy abducted from modern-day America by the Aelf, denizens of Aelfrice. Able remained a captive of the Aelf for many years, kept from aging by their magic, before being dispatched to Mythgarthr to seek redress for certain wrongs done to the Aelf by King Arnthor, ruler of Celidon, who happens to be half-dragon. The nature of these wrongs and the method by which Sir Able is meant to intercede with the king are among the pieces of knowledge stripped from him in the course of his ascension, as are most memories of his life in America, with the

important exception of certain family details: his parents are dead, and he was raised by his older brother, Ben. In fact, the text of *The Wizard Knight* is a long letter Able has written to Ben after the events described therein, the fact that we, who share Ben's world, are reading the letter implies that Ben, too, has read it.

Once in Mythgarthr, Able is gifted with a mysterious bowstring by Parka, an angelic denizen of Kleos; this string vibrates with the voices of the living and the dead, including some from America, which seems an adjunct of Mythgarthr rather than a place existing beyond Elysion and its encapsulated spheres. Early on, Able is seduced by Disiri, queen of the Moss Aelf, who casts a love spell upon him, tasks him with a quest for a magic sword called Eterne, and returns him, in an instant, to his rightful age, so that for the rest of the novel he has the body of a grown man, although he remains psychologically and emotionally a boy. As he struggles to become accepted as a knight within the strictly defined, often brutal hierarchies of the medieval society of Mythgarthr, Able has a number of adventures and meets a number of interesting characters, some human, others not. Michael, an angelic being from Kleos; the Valfather, an Odin-like being from Skai; Setr, a dragon of Muspel living among the Aelf and wrongly worshipped by them; Kulili, the fallen being who created the Aelf to worship her; Uri and Baki, Aelf servants of Setr's who become not altogether faithful servants of Able, Glyf, a talking dog from Skai, Mani, a talking cat; and Org, an ogre, to name but a few. *The Knight* ended with Able, in possession of Eterne, raised to Skai by one of the Valfather's sheldmaidens.

Although each of the seven spheres is a distinct place, the borders between them are permeable, and progress up or down is possible. One may descend all the way to Niflheim, as Able does in *The Wizard*, where he meets the Most Low God. But because the Most High God created things so that the inhabitants of each sphere owe their worship to the inhabitants of the realm directly above, who are in truth their gods, with all that such a reciprocal relationship implies, it is far more difficult to rise upward, and generally only by a single sphere, with a corresponding loss of substance or reality, as when Able's Aelf followers, Uri and Baki, come to him in Mythgarthr. But substances ingested from a higher sphere, especially flesh and blood, can at least temporarily raise the inhabitant of a lower sphere to that height. The dragons of Muspel, for example, through human sacrifice, are able to fully manifest in Mythgarthr even though Muspel is two levels beneath it. The fact that the proper ordering of worship has gone askew in the universe of *The Wizard Knight* is one of the main themes, and Able's purpose is to set things right.

In *The Wizard*, Sir Able returns from Skai with augmented powers he has sworn not to use and a flying mount called Cloud. He is a wizard in the same sense that Gandalf is a wizard, especially the post-Balrog Gandalf, returned to Middle-Earth by the Valar like Gandalf. Able's powers do not derive from a conventional mastery of magic but from a dispensation accorded by a higher power. Nor should the adjectival meaning of "wizard" be overlooked in Wolfe's punning title, for Able is nothing if not a superlative knight.

While years have passed for Able, only months have gone by in Mythgarthr. Most of *The Wizard* is taken up with the mission of Lord Beel to Gilling, king of the Angrhorn, the fearsome giants of Jotunland. Because much of the action takes place while Able is elsewhere, his narration of these events relies upon what other characters have told him, especially Toug, a young knight-aspirant. When Able returns to the center of the action, and resumes his duties as participant-narrator, Toug and others fade from prominence, which readers may regret. After Jotunland, events accelerate toward Able's meeting with King Arnthor, where he completes his quest … and earns a draconian reward. These portions of the novel suffer from haste and compression, with important episodes barely outlined or omitted altogether.

Although, *The Wizard Knight* concludes as movingly as anything Wolfe has written, my enjoyment of the novel was lessened by Wolfe's failure to tie up a number of loose ends, most notably the relationship between America and Mythgarthr. Wolfe used to take great care to supply all the necessary clues to make his intricate puzzles solvable by attentive readers, he no longer seems interested in writing that kind of story.

Shadowmarch, Volume 1, Tad Williams. DAW, New York, hardcover, 800 pp., $25.95, ISBN 0-7564-0219-0.

Tad Williams's latest bears a striking resemblance to George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. A remote northern kingdom, Southmarch, guards the human-settled continent of Eion against incursion by the Twilight People, Eion's eldritch indigenes, who, hundreds of years earlier, were driven back behind a magical boundary called the Shadowline. As the Balkanized kingdoms of Eion squabble for advantage in the absence of Southmarch's monarch, Olin Eddon, who

Continued on page 75

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By Gene Wolfe
Illustration by J.K. Potter

The Vampire Kiss

The things we should fear the most are often the ones that attract us most strongly. There's no shame in it. And

THIS S[illegible] and boys who are easy to meet others—[illegible] most have no education, which is good. A few others of which [illegible] where someone's dashing child is not so long. They [illegible] keep themselves alive [illegible] His [illegible] He [illegible] was frying sausages, and [illegible] I found her grave.

I looked [illegible] lady with sausages.

"No, sir," he said, "with fire. This is the tale, as near as I remember it.

[illegible] stoop, [illegible] most interesting shop. It was [illegible] sausages and [illegible] things. Weather- [illegible] and pipes such as you have [illegible] and games [illegible] and castles and things [illegible] There were [illegible] false teeth [illegible] I was [illegible] on the [illegible] would be [illegible] There were [illegible] and [illegible] you [illegible] was [illegible] and [illegible] as sugar, you know, and I like it well enough.

[illegible] Kind, though. Only they were old and almost dead, and they knew it. I don't think it [illegible] life much one way [illegible]

My father was nearer dying than they were, but he wasn't like them about it. He was holding on. You could see it even when he slept. He fought for every breath, and he was tired, sir, oh, so tired, but brave. His heart wasn't tired, if you take my meaning, only his body. He wanted to live

No, sir, he was too sick to work. Too sick to walk, almost. His skin was the colour of paper, or the handkerchiefs after we've washed them. Mother worked in a shop another woman owned, selling tea. The other woman paid her, and gave her a little tea, too, every day. Loose tea, you know, that she'd put in her pocket and bring home. That was how we had tea, and good tea it was, though we wouldn't have sugar to put in, or milk.

Then she was taken sick too, with the thing my father had. I didn't know what it was, only that she couldn't work and there was nothing to eat. One day the old foreign woman from the ground floor, the one that made the tea, came up to get the rent. Father was a little stronger then and tried to get out of bed. Mother wouldn't let him and begged him to lie down, and went to the door herself though she was almost too weak to walk.

The old woman saw how bad she was, and sat her down, me with her, and talked to us. She went back to her kitchen and got some meat rolled up in leaves and gave it to us. And we ate it. My mother got three. I remember, and brought two in to Father, and said the old woman had given her five. I'll never forget that. My mother had just one, after that, and I had two; but I cut one of mine in two and gave her half. The taste was strange but so good I was sorry afterward that I had done it.

The old woman told us a ghost was drinking Mother's blood, and Father's too. It happened a lot in the country she had been born in, she said. The ghost would fix upon a person, and drink from him until he died, and find another after that. They were like a woman who always went to the same greengrocer, she said, until he closed and retired to the seaside. Then she would go to another. But sometimes they fixed on a certain family instead of a person. They would drink the blood of that family until it was wiped out. She talked about crosses and told my mother to get one, and gave her some garlic on a string that she put around my father's neck after the old woman had gone. Those would keep them off sometimes, for a while. That was what the old woman had said.

But the only way to put an end to them forever was to find the body and stake it down so it could not rise again, or else burn it. You could tell who they were because they looked so healthy in the grave.

She didn't get the rent because we didn't have it. That worried me after, and a dozen times I wanted to ask the old man if he would make us go, though I never did.

What I did—one thing I did—was to make a cross. I made it of two sticks, and tied them together with string, and I put it over their bed, in the little cabinet there where they wouldn't see it. I got mother's scissors too, and opened them to make a cross, and put them under their bed. That was another thing the old woman had said to do, and I did it. My mother didn't sew any more anyway.

After that I would say I was going out to play with the other boys on our street and go looking for the grave. There were three cemeteries close enough to the Green for me to walk to. I went to them one after another, and walked all around in them looking for a grave that looked like the body climbed out of it sometimes. No one ever bothered me for doing it, and I'm sure the people who saw me thought I was mourning someone. My clothes were dark, and I'm sure I looked sad enough. At times the other boys would tease me about it, but not often.

One night I saw her. I was lying in the little bed mother'd make for me on the floor. I had been asleep, but something woke me. I remember hearing the bells strike twelve in Saint James' steeple. How slow they rang and how sad they sounded, and counting the strokes until I got to twelve. I knew it was midnight.

Then I went to a window and looked out. It was October or November, I don't remember which, but it was cold outside, so cold, and papers blowing down the street. It was cold in our lodging, too. I started to shiver and thought I'd get back into bed, or else go sit by what was left of our little fire.

It was coal I'd found, you know, sir, in the alleys. The collier's carts would come and unload coal down the chutes and into the coal cellars of the houses, and sometimes some would spill. It wasn't stealing—nobody wanted it but me. I'd pick up whatever pieces there were, and put them in my pockets to take home. Anyway, I turned around to go to the fire, and there she was.

She was beautiful, sir, and licked her lips as if she were hungry. Those are the things I recall best. I'd seen beautiful ladies before, going into shops and coming out, sometimes in the one where my mother used to clerk. Only they never did look hungry, as this one did. She had a bonnet with black ribbons flying off it, and a big wide skirt.

Yes, sir. A crinoline. That's what they call them. She went into the bedroom, and I got back into bed and pretended to sleep. I would have liked to close my eyes as well—to close them completely, you know, sir. I could not. Each time I tried, I felt that she was bending over me, about to do something terrible. I had to keep them open, just a little.

When she came out, she didn't look hungry anymore, or it seemed to me she didn't. She glanced at me and smiled, perhaps because she had seen I was awake. Her face looked flushed, I thought, as a lady's will if she sits too near the fire. In the morning I tried to believe it was a dream. I tried so hard and so often that there were times when I nearly believed it, but in my heart I knew it wasn't true.

My father died. One day it seemed as if he were recovering, and the next he was dead. Death takes people so, sometimes. I know that. We sold the furniture to bury him, and had no table or chairs after, and my mother slept on the floor, sir, just as I had been doing all along. I would go to the neighbors, trying not to go to any one too often, and ask for a bite to eat. I'd like to say now that I brought it back to Mother and we ate it together, but it wouldn't be true. I ate there, so they could see me, and sometimes I ate it all. But when I could I brought some back, and told her I'd already eaten, which was true. The old man and his wife had us to dinner, too, most Thursdays, which helped a lot.

One day I was out in the street with some other boys. There was one who stole apples, sometimes from the stalls. I had been trying to get him to tell me about it, how to do it without being caught, you know, sir, for it would have killed my mother. I said so, and George Peters said there had been a lady in our house who had killed herself already, years and years ago. Poisoned herself, he said, but some of the others said no, it was her husband who murdered her, and her body was never found. Only they hanged him for it any way is what they said. Then another said he had buried her in the cellar, and they found her there, and that was why they hanged him. I said what did she look like, and they all said she was beautiful, though there wasn't even one who had seen her himself then.

After that I went into the cellar and looked. I had a stub of candle, you know, and when I went down the cellar seemed quite ordinary. There were dusty boxes and some old shelves with rubbish on them, but that was all.

Only that night as I lay in bed, it seemed to me I had intended to look behind one particular box, and had forgotten about it before I did. It bothered me so much I couldn't sleep, sir. I got up and lit my candle stub at the fire, and went back down.

It was different at night. I knew that right away. Bigger somehow, and the air was different. I went down the steps anyway, though I was very frightened. It was hard to make myself do it, but I did. And I walked over to the box that I had been thinking about when I ought to have slept, and peered behind it. There was nothing there; and when I saw that there wasn't, I felt wonderful.

But when I turned around to go back up to my bed, there was grave, a deep one, in the middle of the cellar floor. It hadn't been there before, sir. I know it hadn't, for I couldn't have missed it. I suppose I went over to look in, though I have never

remembered going there But I did, and crouched, and held my candle-stub low to look down deep, and there she was I stared and stared until she opened her eyes and saw me

Oh, I knew what I ought to do, sir. I ought to have got a stake and staked her down But I could not face it, I was that afraid. *Yellow* is what Jack would say. I'm shamed now, shamed to own myself a coward, but I slept with my mother that night and trembled at every little sound

In the morning I thought I would find something for us to eat, and afterward find a stake and borrow a mallet to drive it with, but when I came back with some crusts a kind lady had given me, Mother was dead

I wept and told the old woman downstairs why, and she said I must tell the beadle, and he would see to the burial. So I did, and he did, but he took an unconscionably long time about it. I ate those crusts while waiting for her grave to be dug, I remember that They had been hers, and my plan had been to throw them into the grave after the coffin was put in. Only I ate them instead, and I'll not forgive myself for it

The streetlamps were lit by the time I got back home, but there were still boys in the street, boys I knew, mostly. They wanted to talk, and said they were sorry, and had I touched her after she was dead? I was trying to get past them, for I didn't want to talk, when the lady I had seen in the grave came out of the house just like she lived there She had a parasol and that gown we spoke of, sir, and she looked ever so lovely

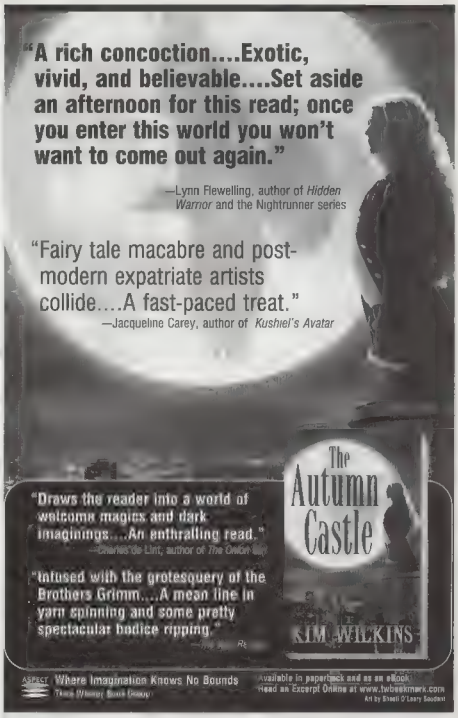
I froze when I saw her. I couldn't have moved or spoken for anything. And she bent down and kissed me, right there on the street, and said, "Poor, poor child!"

Then she was gone I blinked, you know, and looked around at the other boys, and saw they were envious It was the strangest thing, sir, but they were. They wished they had been me, every one of them I felt proud when I saw it. Proud and bad at the same time

Before long Bob Perkins said, "She ain't a dab beauty is she? Oh, no! Not a bit of it." And a dozen more started talking the same I couldn't believe it. I just could not, sir. I wanted to be gone from the Green that moment. Then George said, "Had a spot o' tallow on her bodice though. Candle dripped, I reckon."

Tommy fell silent after he had told me that. I gave him a sausage in the hope it would persuade him to open up a bit more, but it was to no avail He said, "Thank you, Mister Fagin," as nice as you please, but that was all. When he had finished it, he wiped his hands on my hearthrug as boys will, and went outside to rejoin Jack Dawkins

He has been taken now, poor Tommy has, and transported as we hear. His tale has remained with me, however, thus I set it down ❧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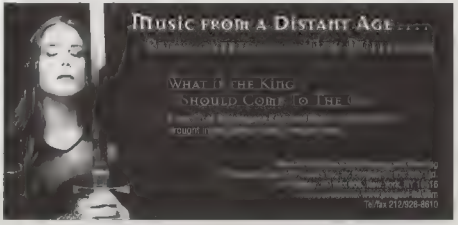

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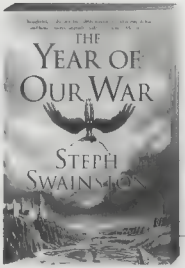

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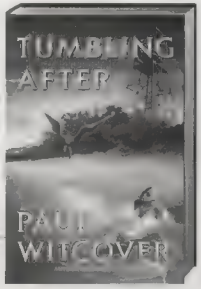

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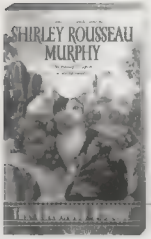

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It's bad enough to cross paths with the otherworld, but when you meet up with the otherworld's underworld—watch out.

THE WOODEN BABY

By Graham Edwards
Illustration by Michael Komarch

I'm hard to find. Don't ask me why, it just works that way.

I don't place ads. I'm not in the phone book. I don't have a Website and there isn't a search engine that even knows I exist.

But I exist all right. And people who need my services badly enough, well, they track me down somehow.

Like the woman who burst into my office last night. Tall and sleek and muffled up in furs, she crashed through the door with the same bemused look they all come in with.

"Did I just take a wrong turn?"

"You tell me, ma'am," I said, fixing her accent as English, someplace in the south.

I didn't bother to take my feet off the desk. For all I knew she was from the tax office and, believe me, I don't treat them any nicer than they treat me. If she was a client, well, I'd find out soon enough.

She stood there in the doorway, rain pooling in her shadow, dithering from one foot to the other, not saying anything. I let her do this for a minute or two, then I said, "Can I help you, ma'am?"

'Um … '

She didn't complete the thought. Instead her face crumpled up like an old paper bag and she started to wail. I hate it when they do that. I counted to ten. When she didn't stop, I heaved my boots off the desk, scratched about in a drawer for a box of tissues, and dropped them in front of her.

"Take your time," I said, adding, "but close the door before I die of pneumonia."

She shut out the rain and sat down. By the time she'd dried her face and blown the snot out of her nose I'd figured out she wasn't from the tax office. That meant she was probably going to hire me, even though she didn't know it herself yet. I gave her another minute before saying,

"What do you want to talk to me about?"

Up close, I could see she wasn't as sleek as I'd first thought. Her blue eyes were bright enough but the bags under them were gray and dead. Her cheeks were flushed but the rest of her face was pale as cheese. This woman looked as if she hadn't slept for a month.

"It's my … oh dear. I really don't know where to start."

"The beginning is good for me."

But she wasn't listening. Instead she was eyeballing my office, sending those bright blue eyes on the grand tour. I let her take it all in: the grimy windows looking out into the snow, the big map of the world with two hundred pins stuck in it, the certificates on the walls in their lop-sided frames, the loaded-up bookcase near the back wall. She couldn't stop her lip from curling when she saw the trail of scum the coffee machine had leaked down the side of the filing cabinet.

"It might look shabby," I said, "but it's home."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I really don't know quite how I got here. I think I—"

"Let me help you out," I interrupted. "You're in a fix. You got to the end of your tether. You tried everything you could think of, and more besides. You even got so you couldn't tell what was real any more. So you thought you'd take a little walk, try to clear your head that wasn't Beth."

I didn't say anything, just glared at her. She glared right back.

"I know that sounds crazy but it's true. It wasn't Beth, not at first. It was a baby all right but it was all … twisted, like someone had heard what babies looked like but never seen one and tried to make one for themselves and got it all mixed up. Parts of it were shrivelled and other parts were backwards and it was . . oh God it was horrible!"

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. I couldn't! I was rooted to the spot. But then I looked again and it *was* Beth. She was lying there fast asleep, just as I'd left her and I just laughed, like a hysterical little laugh and thought, 'It's the wine. Amelia, just the wine, you fool!' But then, when I looked for the third time, I saw what had really happened.'

"That she'd turned to wood?"

"Y-yes."

I took the English woman up in my arms, flattened her out, and folded her in half before posting her sideways through one of the cracks in the cellar walls.

You just kept walking and walking until you found yourself in a neighborhood you didn't recognize and then you just walked some more, until finally you wound up outside my office. The light was on so you thought you'd just come on in. Am I right so far?"

Her eyes softened a little. As she turned her head into the light the gray bags didn't look quite so dark. "Yes. Yes, that's it exactly. How did you know?"

"When it's all I know it's not so hot. So why don't you fill me in on the rest. Why'd you take the walk in the first place?"

"It was … it's the baby. It … it was driving me crazy. I didn't know what to do. I don't know what to do anymore. I keep getting these crazy ideas that … well, these crazy ideas. It's not just tonight, it's been going on for a fortnight, ever since …"

She hesitated and for a minute I thought the tears were coming again.

"Ever since what?" I said.

The woman with the blue eyes loosened the furs around her neck and relaxed back into the chair.

"Ever since my baby turned to wood."

I nodded and said, "Go on."

"It was just after Christmas," said the English woman.

"The thirtieth of December. I'd put little Beth to sleep as usual and poured myself a glass of wine and just settled down in front of the TV when I heard this scraping noise from the back door. So I went to look."

"Were you alone in the house?" I said. "Apart from the baby, I mean?"

"Yes." She cast her blue eyes down at the floor. "My husband left me last summer. We'd always said we'd never have children but with him it was like an obsession. He said if I ever got pregnant he'd leave me so . . so he did."

"That's too bad."

"I'm better off without him. Anyway, the scraping. I … I went to the back door and looked out but there was nothing there. On the way back to the parlour I checked on Beth—you always do when you get up, you can't help yourself—but when I looked into her cot I saw … I saw .. "

Her lips were trembling and the tears were filling up her eyes again. But I didn't want her to stop.

"What did you see?"

With a shudder she pulled herself together. "I saw a baby there

"And that's your story?"

The woman leaned forward across the desk and clasped her hands on top of mine. Now those blue eyes were pleading with me. "Please, I know it sounds insane but it's the truth! You have to believe me! It's been two weeks since then and nothing's changed. She doesn't move, she doesn't cry, she doesn't feed, she doesn't do anything. But when I put my ear to her chest I can hear her heart beating and when I put my lips near hers I can feel her breath. She's alive in there, somehow, somewhere, my Beth is in there! Inside this, this statue! I haven't been out of the house, I've hardly eaten anything myself. I've been afraid to go out at all until … until tonight."

I pulled my hands out from under hers and stood up. The movement surprised her and she sat back with a little yelp. Head down, I ambled over to the coffee machine and poured myself a slug.

"You want some?" I said.

"Is it decaffeinated?"

I barked a laugh at her and drained the cup.

"I'll take the case," I said after I'd thrown the dirty cup into the sink to join its friends.

"You'll … the case? You mean … "

"I mean I charge three-fifty a day plus expenses. I need fifty up-front and if I don't deliver the goods in a week we call it quits. Suit you?"

"S-suit me? You mean …?"

"I mean, Mrs … ?"

"Miss Henson. I use my maiden name now."

"What I mean, Miss Henson, is I'll try to find out what's happened to your little girl and, if I can, put it right."

"You mean … you believe me?"

"Ma'am, it isn't my job to believe anything. All I do is deal with what I find. Now, shall we go?"

"G-go?"

"I need to see your baby, Miss Henson. Right now is good for me. How are you fixed?"

I pulled my coat from the peg, turned it inside-out three times until it was made of fur, and threw it over my shoulders. Then I opened the second drawer of the filing cabinet and chose myself a small silver pistol, no bigger than my thumb. The second drawer is full of weapons, some of which even work against ordinary people. The one I chose I hadn't used for ten years and it was tarnished as hell, but I had a hunch I'd be needing it—or something like it—

before the night was out. As it turned out, my hunch was right.

Once I'd settled the little gun into my shoulder holster I went over to the map. I was aware of the woman watching me strangely through all of this—especially the coat business—but it's all part of the process. By the time they reach my office they're ready to believe anything. It's my job to make them realize they ain't seen nothing yet.

Standing in front of the map, I picked out a green pin from the cardboard box stuck to the wall beside it and stabbed it into the little triangle that was England. There were six other pins stuck there, all of which brought back old memories I didn't even want to think about.

"That right?" I said.

"I'm sorry?"

She walked up and peered at the map.

"From your accent I'm guessing you live in Suffolk. Am I right? Is my pin in the right place?"

She looked closer, then her eyes widened.

"Yes," she whispered. "It's in exactly the right place."

"Thought so. Follow me."

She followed me in a kind of daze—they're always in a daze at this stage of the game. If I'm honest with myself, this is the part where I could almost get to enjoy what I do. Almost.

I led her to the back of the office and lifted up the trapdoor behind the bookcase. I flipped the switch but the light didn't come on, so the steps looked as if they were leading more or less to the center of the Earth. I made a mental note to fix the bulb as soon as I got back.

"You want me to go down there?" she said with a quiver in her voice.

"I know it looks kind of screwy but you've just got to trust me on this."

She teetered at the top of the stairs like a swimmer trying to decide whether or not to dive in. But she wasn't looking down into the darkness—she was looking at me, scrutinizing me with those blue eyes squinted half-shut.

"Who are you?" she said.

"Name's on the door," I said, jerking a thumb behind me. A frown crossed her face but she didn't follow the thumb.

"And where am I? Is this … you sound American but … "

I laughed. "You set out from your little old village front door in little old Suffolk, England, and you think you've walked yourself all the way to America? Lady, are you living in a fantasy world or something?"

"Can you really help me?"

"I'll do my best, ma'am. Now, we really need to go."

She took a deep breath, then grasped the handrail.

"All right," she said. "I'll trust you. This isn't any crazier than what's been happening to me since New Year."

So down the steps we went, into the darkness, where I took the English woman up in my arms, flattened her out, and folded her in half before posting her sideways through one of the cracks in the cellar walls.

Then I took off my coat, turned it inside-out until the black fur had turned white, and followed her.

"Is this it?"

"Huh?"

I hate having to repeat myself almost as much as I hate the cold. "Is this it?"

"What did you … how did we get here?"

"Is this where you live?"

"What did you do to me?"

"For the last time, Miss Henson … "

"Yes! I'm sorry, yes, this is my front door!"

"Good. If you'd like to open it we can get the hell out of this blizzard."

"Wasn't your coat black before?"

"The door, Miss Henson!"

The cottage was in darkness except for the little

parlor, where she'd left the TV on. On the screen this couple was doing what most couples do in the dark. Miss Henson blushed red in the gaudy blue light and turned it off in a hurry.

"They'll put anything on at this time of night," she said as she switched on the table lamp.

"I'll take my fifty now, if that's all right," I said.

"Your . . . oh, the deposit, of course. Just wait here please."

I waited while she went upstairs. With her footsteps creaking about two feet above my head I took a look round the cramped little room.

There wasn't much to see. It was all quaint and frilly and English and immaculate.

"Where's the baby?" I said when she'd returned and handed over the cash. I noted without comment that she'd changed into a silk robe.

"Through here," she said. "It used to be my husband's study. Beth sleeps here during the day. It saves me having to run upstairs if she cries."

"Only she doesn't cry any more, right?"

Her face looked about ready to break apart but somehow she held it together. I leafed quickly through the money she'd given me.

"Oh," she said, "I assumed you wanted pounds, you know—sterling. Would you prefer dollars?"

"Why would I prefer dollars?"

"I just thought … nothing."

I checked my gun and followed her through to the study.

On one wall was a bookcase that looked ready to give up its load to gravity. Reference books, by the look of them, most of them pretty old. In the corner was a neat desk that looked even older. In the middle of the warped wooden floor was a white wooden cot with a fluffy pink mobile hanging over it. Inside the cot was a small shape, wrapped in pink, turned to face away from the door.

"Your husband's things?" I said, indicating the furniture.

"Yes. He never came back for them."

"He left all those books? What happened? Did he forget how to read?"

"No, he … he just never came back."

I let it go for now.

Before approaching the cot, I took off my coat and turned it inside-out four times. When I put it back on it was half the length and made of calfskin.

"How do you do that?" she said.

"How do I do what?"

"That thing with the coat. Is it a trick? It has to be a trick."

"No trick," I said. "Just a coat."

Hand on the grip of the little silver pistol, I cautiously approached the cot. Circling round so I could get a proper view of whatever was inside, I dropped to my knees and peered in through the bars.

It was a wooden baby, just like the woman said.

The shawl was pink fluff but all the rest was carved from wood, apple if I wasn't mistaken. It was prettily done, very fine work and, I assumed, a fair likeness of the little girl. The skin was all marquetry, with the grain set to follow all the contours. The eyes had little beads of sap gathered in the corners and the lips were glossy and looked soft as marshmallows, even though I knew they were hard as, well, as wood. Instead of hair it had an unruly tangle of brambles.

Underneath the shawl I could see its chest was moving, just slightly, and when I put my finger near its mouth I could feel its breath. All just like Miss Henson told me.

"Do you know what this is?" I said, standing up straight.

Hand near her mouth, blue eyes wide, she shook her head slowly.

"It's what most people call a changeling," I said. I waited for her reaction, but there was none. "Some people, little people who I know as the sidhe—but then I've got Irish blood from way back so I'm old fashioned like that—like to make mischief with human babies and, well, they like to play a game of mix and match."

"Human babies?" she mumbled. "Mix and match?"

"If we're in Suffolk then they'll be known round here as ... Fershers, I guess. Gift-bringers, traditionally, though not folks you want to cross."

"Excuse me, did you say Farner?"

"I said Fershers. Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Why, Miss Henson?" I snapped. "Tell me!"

She flinched and said, "It's just ... Farrier was my husband's name. My married name. I ... I just got confused for a minute, I suppose."

"Confused. Of course."

"Please, you were telling me about these, what did you call them? Changelings?"

I glared at the little wooden baby and, with my hand still on the grip of the pistol, said, "Let's go back to the parlor, Miss Henson, and I'll fill you in."

ing the very latest edition?"

I thought that would open her eyes but it didn't. Her brow furrowed and she hesitated before saying, "He never cancelled his subscription."

"And you just keep filing them in the bookcase?"

"Where else would I put them?"

"Where indeed. Miss Henson, this agreement you had with your husband about not having children. Whose idea was it?"

"Whose ... well, it wasn't really like that. It was just ... the way we wanted to be."

"But it was really your husband who was against it."

"We felt the same. But when I got pregnant with Beth ..."

"What happened?"

"He went berserk. He shouted at me, telling me he couldn't live with me anymore, that if he stayed he couldn't be responsible for what might happen. He scared me, frankly, he really did. I was glad

...the changeling was like Beth's evil twin. Emaciated, ugly as a tree stump, it vomited green bile down my arm and sank pointed fangs into the sleeve of my coat.

"A changeling," I said, "is what the sidhe—or the Fershers in this case—leave behind when they take a human child."

"But why do they want to take the child in the first place?" Miss Henson interrupted. Reclining on a low chair, with long legs tucked under the silk of her robe, she looked all in.

"I'll come to that. The changeling is most often an ugly sidhe child that screams and makes mischief. A real pain to have around the house. But sometimes, if the sidhe have no child to exchange, they leave a lump of wood that resembles the baby instead. Only the wood usually rots away within twenty four hours. This—what you have here—is very unusual. I've never come across anything like it before."

"What happens to the babies they take?" She was fighting to keep the tremor out of her voice. I had to admire her for that.

I shrugged. "They get raised by the sidhe as their own and are never seen in this world again." Her body jerked as if I'd shot her in the gut. I pressed on regardless. "Occasionally you can get them back—that usually involves being excessively kind to the changeling, but that's no guarantee. Some reckon if you can make the changeling laugh that'll do the trick."

"And Beth?"

Again I shrugged. "Hard to know. Like I said, I've never seen one like this before."

She gave a long, shuddering sigh, then stifled a yawn.

"So where do we go from here?"

"We don't go anywhere. We stay here and I ask you some questions."

"Really?" She was listless now, and her lids were drooping over her fine blue eyes. "Can't you just go and do ... whatever it is you do?"

"This is what I do, ma'am."

"Oh, very well. But really, I feel like I haven't slept for a month." So saying, she closed her eyes. "Ask away," she said a moment later. "I am still awake."

"Did your husband read *National Geographic* magazine?"

"Why yes! How did you ... oh, the books in the study." Eyes still closed, she settled herself deeper into her chair.

"Precisely. A fine collection."

"He's got them dating back to the last century."

"Very impressive. Now, he left you in ... July last year, did you say?"

"June."

"Ah yes, June. Tell me, Miss Henson, why does the bookcase contain all the copies of *National Geographic* since June last year, including the very latest edition?"

I thought that would open her eyes but it didn't. Her brow furrowed and she hesitated before saying, "He never cancelled his subscription."

"And you just keep filing them in the bookcase?"

"Where else would I put them?"

"Where indeed. Miss Henson, this agreement you had with your husband about not having children. Whose idea was it?"

"Whose ... well, it wasn't really like that. It was just ... the way we wanted to be."

"But it was really your husband who was against it."

"We felt the same. But when I got pregnant with Beth ..."

"What happened?"

"He went berserk. He shouted at me, telling me he couldn't live with me anymore, that if he stayed he couldn't be responsible for what might happen. He scared me, frankly, he really did. I was glad he left in the end."

"Hmm. This scratching you heard, by the back door. Did it come from outside the house or inside?"

"Inside, I think. It's funny, but at first I thought it was coming from under the floor ... "

I whipped my gun out and rushed into the study. I was vaguely aware of her eyes springing open in wide blue shock as I knocked her chair aside. Dropping to my knees, I fired six shots into the floorboards under the baby's cot. The old, dry wood splintered open, creating a great gash into which I plunged my hands.

Something skittered away in the darkness under the floor, something just a little bigger than a rat.

"Farner!" I yelled. "Hold it right there and come out with your hands up!"

There was the tiniest pause, then a slender green shape flitted through the darkness. I snapped the gun toward it and it stopped.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw my client stumble barefoot into the study. She'd dropped the robe and from where I was crouched it looked like her legs went all the way up to the ceiling.

"Don't move!" I called to her. Then I shouted into the floor again. "The game's up. Come out, Farrier! Come out now!"

I heard her gasp as a tiny figure clambered into view from the cavity beneath the floor. No more than a foot high, he was slender and naked and green. His eyes flashed angrily as he raised his lanky little arms above his head.

"I promise you, I'm saying nothing," he said in a voice like a joy-buzzer.

"You're good at breaking promises, aren't you," I replied.

"Geoffrey!" exclaimed Miss Henson before those remarkable legs collapsed her into a dead faint on the study floor.

Geoffrey Farrier glared at me, dwarfed by the armchair in which he sat. His feet didn't even reach the edge of the cushion. But, ridiculous though he looked, I kept him covered all the while with the little silver pistol.

"You fired six shots," he squeaked.

"The gun holds seven," I replied, "and you know it."

His green eyes glinted but I saw his tiny shoulders slump.

"So," I said, "you want to spill your story?"

"I'll bet you got it all worked out already," spat Farner.

"Indulge me," I said. "And if you won't do that—tell it to the lady."

Miss Henson was backed right into the corner of the room, arms

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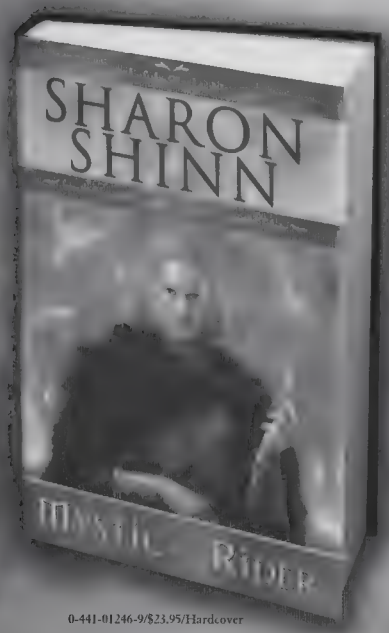

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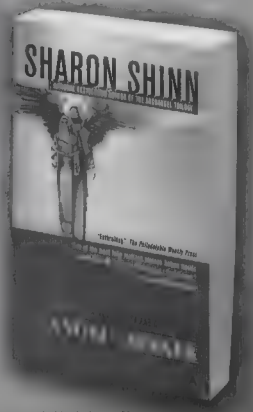

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rigid by her sides. Her face was white, but it was also open, interested. Well, it's not every day you learn your ex-husband s one of the little people.

Farrier glowered some more, then relented. "Oh, all right. Guess it won't make any difference now. See, the whole thing was a put-up job. I'd got myself .. well, got myself into trouble, back where I come from. That's all you need to know. My punishment was to marry one of the big people."

He pulled a face like a man about to throw up his breakfast.

"You little runt!" Miss Henson shouted, marching out of her corner. "You enjoyed our wedding night well enough! But you were bigger—I mean, normal-sized."

Farrier turned the color of a lime—a Fershер blush, I assumed. "We change size," he muttered. "You can't blame me for making the best of it. Anyway, if I could stick it out for five years without a baby coming along I was due to get parole." He threw a pleading look at his ex-wife. "That's why I never wanted children. The rest of it ... it really wasn't so bad, was it?"

Now it was Miss Henson's turn to look like she was about to be sick.

"So, there I was with just a year to go and she goes and gets pregnant," he said, looking at me now. "I mean, what's a Fershер to do? Then it came to me—if I let her give birth and then got the child changed, maybe I could buy my way out. I mean, changelings are like gold dust these days." He scowled. "It would have worked too. It only takes thirty days for the changeling to set, then I could have made off with the real baby, deliver it to the Grand Sidhe Council and won my parole. Only you had to come along and spoil it."

He was talking but he was also thinking. I could see it in his frisky green eyes. Thinking that because I was letting him talk he was in with a chance. Sometimes I like to let them think that. Sometimes it just helps everything work out right.

Miss Henson advanced on the armchair until she was towering over it and its diminutive occupant.

"Where's Beth, you low-life?" she said. "Where's my daughter?"

Geoffrey Farrier's eyes flicked sideways, then he was launching himself out of the chair. He leaped higher than even I had anticipated- right past the head of the astonished Miss Henson. His feet clipped her hair; she screamed and tried to grab him. Spinning in the air, he sprouted long dragonfly wings and buzzed straight toward the window.

Halfway there, he dipped, arms extended, and snatched the wooden baby from the cot. Miss Henson was grappling with her hair, thinking he was still in there. I already had my gun leveled, the last bullet ready.

I fired.

Geoffrey Farrier screamed.

Miss Henson screamed.

The wooden baby split where the bullet struck it and fell in two neat halves to the floor.

I shrugged the coat from my back and cracked it like a whip. The sleeves elongated and feathered their open ends into a pair a furry mittens, which caught the two falling babies spilled by the wooden dummy. Tugging gently on the stretched lining of the coat, I rolled them back toward me and gathered them both up.

Unbalanced, Farrier lost control of his wings and crashed sideways into the wall. He dropped like a downed moth.

I walked over to Miss Henson, who had watched all this with a stunned look, and delivered her daughter, the beautiful and entirely human Beth, into her waiting arms. Both mother and daughter started to cry. I turned away—I never linger on a sappy moment.

The other baby—the changeling—was like Beth's evil twin. Emaciated, ugly as a tree stump, it vomited green bile down my arm and sank pointed fangs into the sleeve of my coat. Fortunately, I'd had the foresight to turn the lining to crocodile skin, so the bite was adequately deflected.

I kicked aside the broken halves of the empty shell that had kept both babies so well hidden for so long, and dumped the repulsive changeling into the lap of the semiconscious Farrier. It crushed him in a most satisfactory way, waking him up more effectively than the sharpest dose of smelling salts.

"You lousy, stinking ... " Farrier began.

"Now, now," I said, "that's no way to talk about your only child. When you take it back to the Council, I suggest you plead for leniency. On the other hand, I know what a dim view they take with Fershers who fail to find a suitable home for a changeling. And that one really is a most wretched example of the species. Perhaps they'll ask you to look after it on a permanent basis."

Still on Farrier's lap, the changeling rolled onto its belly and wrapped its scrawny arms around his neck. Then it plucked out its eyes and stuffed them up Farrier's nose. When it had retrieved them it burped a noxious green fog into his face and urinated all over his legs.

Holding my nose, I knelt beside the changeling and, before it could do anything unspeakable to me, whispered something in its ear.

The changeling looked bemused, then started giggling.

"No!" screamed Farrier, just a second before the changeling—and he—vanished from the world with a resounding "pop" of displaced air.

"Why did he hide both babies? Beth and the ... that thing!"

I looked round to see Miss Henson perched on the edge of the armchair. The paleness was gone from her face, which was as pink and healthy as that of the baby she was nursing. I looked away—I'm about as comfortable with biology as I am with sappiness—and said, "My guess he thought he could work a scam. He knew the Grand Sidhe Council would take your Beth, no questions asked. But if he could hold on to the changeling as well he could play the same game with some other sucker—sorry, some other young mother. So he came up with the wooden baby as a kind of smokescreen. Clever piece of work, I'll say that much."

"But where did he get the changeling from in the first place?"

I pulled a face. "You saw that thing. Nobody wants a changeling. You say you'll take one off a person's hands, they don't ask too many questions."

She nodded. The baby gurgled.

"So how did you get rid of it?" she said.

"You remember I said it sometimes works if you make them laugh?"

"Yes. But what did you say?"

I shrugged. "I just told it a joke.

"What joke?"

I tapped the side of my nose.

"Trade secret, ma'am," I said.

At the door she said, "The rest of the money—oh, but you didn't work a whole day. What's the total charge?"

I took a look at her face, and the face of the little baby asleep in her arms. And then, may all the gods preserve me, I said,

"What you gave me is sufficient, ma'am."

"Really?" she said. "All right. Thank you, Mr .. er ... "

"Goodnight, ma'am."

"Oh, goodnight. And thank you."

I took off my coat, turned it inside out until the fur had turned to oilskin, and slung it back over my shoulders. Once I was round the corner I folded myself up three times and took the scenic route back to my office.

I dropped the fifty into the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. The cabinet told me it wasn't enough and asked me if I was getting sappy in my old age.

"You wouldn't understand," I said, and kicked it.

I poured myself a coffee and waited for the next customer to walk in out of the rain. ❧

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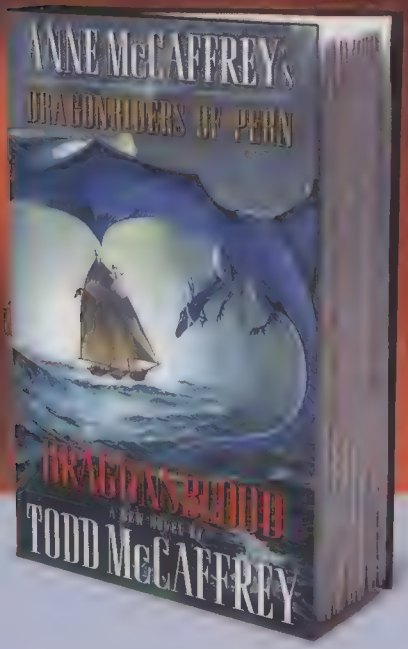

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Death, the Devil, and the Lady in White

By Richard Parks

Illustration by [illegible]

Many years ago, in a kingdom far to the north, there was a deep, dark pool that was rumored to be the entrance to the underworld. The pool could never be discovered, however, by anyone looking for it. Instead, a deep, forested pond was haunted by a beautiful and terrible spirit. Every year a certain number of men, both the young and foolish and the old and foolish, would find the pool and in consequence leave their bones to sink into the mud or settle among the shadows. Since the creature responsible for this was the Lady in White, who believed in keeping her own counsel, it is not surprising that little was to be expected.

[illegible] was to be expected.

[illegible] would fall in love with her.

He was from the nearby village of Hrafnsvik. Legends and memories had supplied many of the bones to the pool, but in the Pale Lady's absence the name was unmentionable. For her it was enough to know. He was not a complete fool, even in love—he knew that his passion for the Lady in White was dangerous and above all potentially fatal. Yet in the days [illegible]

The first sign of her was a plume of white mist that appeared over the center of the pool. Sometimes the mist hovered there and wavered gently, as if the Lady in White was debating whether to manifest. Sometimes she did not appear at all, and the mist would dissipate after a while. John had mixed emotions then. On the one hand, if his lady appeared from the mist, John at least would get a chance to see her. On the other hand, if she did appear, chances were good that someone was about to die.

John tried to prevent those deaths. He would spot a traveler on the path and go to meet him, quickly before it was too late, and warn him. "You'll die if you go any closer," he would say. If the traveler was merely on the wrong path he would thank John and turn away, but that seldom was the case. Usually the traveler would either simply push past him and say nothing or declare as he did so that he was not afraid, but of course he was. Yet he would not turn back. Sometimes John wondered if he should do more but, if a man is determined to find his destiny, there's really not much point in arguing. Still, John continued to try.

SO IT WAS THAT, ON THAT PARTICULAR EVENING WHEN the mist started to form that sweet, familiar shape, John got up from his seat on a fallen log and hurried down to the path to meet the next doomed man. However, in contrast to all the others, this doomed man did not act doomed at all. An older man, tall and bony as if weathered away by life, walked briskly down the path toward the pool, whistling as he went.

John hailed the man courteously. "Excuse me sir, but by your manner it's clear to me that you do not realize that this path leads to the abode of a very dangerous creature, and surely you do not mean to go there."

"Thank you, and you are quite correct," replied the thin old man with equal politeness. "Rather, I was looking for you."

John blinked at that. "Do I know you?"

"We've never met before," the man said.

John took a closer look at the stranger. Second inspection confirmed the first: he was a skinny old man, with flesh stretched tight on his limbs and face, but his eyes were bright and his smile quick and there was a spring in his step that wouldn't have been out of place in the tread of a much younger man. His clothes were of good quality but travel-worn. He wore a dagger and a pouch around his waist, and he bore a short staff that was probably more for protection from robbers than to aid in walking.

He leaned on the staff and continued to smile. "My name is Death," he said. "I wanted to get that out of the way so there would be no misunderstandings later, John Alby."

John was too stunned to wonder how the old man knew his name—the old man was clearly mad, and perhaps dangerous as well. John took a step back, and the old man waved his hand.

"No need to concern yourself, lad—it is not your time. Today I merely want to talk to you."

John hesitated, but the old man seemed harmless enough, if completely addle-pated. "Of course. But what about?"

The old man laughed. "Why, the Lady in White, of course. Your love."

John frowned. "How did you know I loved the Lady in White?"

"I simply knew that someone would, and, since you are here, you are the one. No need to ask why, I suppose—she is beautiful is she not? Close enough to touch and yet totally and forever beyond reach. A certain type of man cannot help but love her."

John wondered if he had been insulted, but there was nothing in the man's manner that even hinted so. If anything, the stranger seemed a little envious.

Death sighed. "John, I know you don't believe I am who I say I am, and that's all right. I propose that you test me. I need to prove that I understand the nature of the Lady in White and can be of service to you in the matter of winning her love. That is your secret dream, is it not?"

John stared at the man for several seconds. The old man, for his part, waited patiently for John to find his voice again. "You're serious?" John said at last.

"In all I do," the man replied, still smiling.

"How can you know my secret dream?"

Death sighed. "How could I not? It is the nature of love to seek consummation; all else is philosophy and denial. Or are you going to claim that you do not wish to win the Lady in White?"

"Of course I want to win her! Yet she is not even human, I may be in love, but I do not deceive myself there. It is impossible."

"Difficult and unlikely? Yes. Not impossible. That is what you must believe, and so, again, why you must believe me. I know the one way that your dream can come true. How close are you able to get to the pool?"

John pointed up at the small grove where his customary log lay on a thick carpet of dead leaves. "On top of that small hill. I dare go no closer."

The old man nodded. "Well, then. Follow me and we will get much closer. You needn't worry so long as you stay behind me. If anything happens, I will be first and pay the price of my mistake. Fair enough?"

John shrugged. "I suppose so. Lead and I will follow."

John followed the old man farther down the path, closer and closer to the Lady in White's pool. John couldn't help but feel nervous about getting so close, the fact that he loved the beautiful spirit in no way diminished the fact that he had seen what happened to men who got too close to her, and he did not want the same happening to him. Yet as they made their way through the banks of high reeds by the shore, the figure in the mist did not move, did not react. It was as if she could not see them. John started to ask about this, but almost instantly the form in the mist began to solidify, and the old man held up his hand for silence.

This was John's first good, close look at his love, and his concept of her went from half-glimpsed and mostly imagined to very real. She was, if anything, more beautiful than he had believed. She floated on the mist as if she were made of mist herself. Her hair and gown were the white of snowflakes that had yet to touch earth; her face was paler than the moon and her eyes blacker than night. For a moment or two John could do nothing but stare.

The Lady in White, for her part, looked puzzled. She looked right and left as she hovered there over the black water, looking for something and never quite finding it. John knew his life hung by a frayed thread, but he did not want to leave and the old man did not seem in any particular hurry. In fact, he seemed to be waiting for something. He turned back to John and, though his voice never even raised to a whisper, his lips formed a word.

Wait.

Someone else was coming down the path, they could not see him yet, but they could hear him—the man had a great stomping footfall that made the rushes quiver. Now the Lady was looking neither right nor left but directly down the path. The old man who called himself Death nodded and turned back the way they had come, pushing John before him. They had gone less than thirty paces when they saw the newcomer.

John knew the man. Matthew Sanger was a blacksmith in Tunby, a great black-haired lout with a greater liking for drink, fighting, and bragging than honest work, but someone John had no wish to see come to harm. John reached out and grabbed the man's arm. "Go back!" he hissed. "She'll kill you!"

Like all the others, Matthew simply kept walking, pulling away from John as if he wasn't even there. John reached for him again, but old man Death was there in front of him, bony hands on John's shoulders, restraining him with surprising strength. "You can't help him. Watch."

John watched as Matthew strode defiantly down to the shore of the pool. He watched as Matthew stood suddenly still when he saw the Lady in White for the first time. In another moment Matthew was walking very quickly into the pool, reaching out overhead to try and grasp the Lady in White but of course he could not. She remained

there out of reach, not smiling, not laughing, not changing her expression at all as Matthew slipped under the water.

The apparition paid no further attention to the bubbles rising from the water, and after a few moments they ceased and the ripples began to fade. She was searching the shore again with those beautiful, terrible eyes.

"She can hear us, as you might have guessed by now," the old man said. "Let's go back down the path a bit where we can talk freely."

Defeated, John let himself be steered back to a safe distance. He shook himself free, finally, and walked back up the hill to his log. The old man followed at a respectful distance and waited while John sat on his log and watched the specter until she turned back to mist and drifted away. Then the old man joined him on his log.

"I've seen it before," John said. "And I try to help, and I very seldom can. Why? Why do they do it?"

The old man laughed. "Say rather why you sought to help that man even though you knew there was no point. Or why you sit on this log in the cool of the evening and pine for that lovely expression of immanent mortality. Answer your own question, John Alby."

John sighed. "I can't."

The old man nodded. "Neither could they. So. Do you accept that I am Death?"

John hesitated. "I accept that you are a very unusual man and have the ability to get close to my love safely. She couldn't see us. How did you do that?"

"Your unasked question is more important: How will you do it?" The old man reached under his shirt and pulled out a small rock crystal pendant on a leather thong. He held it up for John to see. "With this little trifle. It renders anyone who wears it invisible to creatures of the night such as the Lady in White. Quite a useful thing. If you wear it, you can do alone what we just did together."

John sighed. "I have seen my love's true face. Name your price, for without that pendant there is no hope."

Death nodded. "There's little hope even with the pendant, if things continue as they are. Sooner or later you'll go to her. They all do."

John glared at him. "You claim to know so much of the matter—tell me how I solve this problem."

"For the same price? We hadn't yet settled that."

"What do you want from me, then?"

"Only that you listen to what I have to say and act on it. That is how you will pay me. Do you agree?"

John shrugged. There was no harm in listening. "Certainly," he said.

The old man held out the crystal pendant and John, hardly daring to believe his good fortune, took it.

"As you agreed, you must listen to me and do as I instruct, or else, sooner or later, the Lady in White will claim you as surely as she did Matthew Sanger."

John frowned. "You knew Matthew Sanger?"

"I know everyone," the old man said. When John just stared at him he sighed and went on. "Men come to the Lady's pool for their own reasons, but the nature of her power is that it does not compel a man to embrace her unless she can see him. That's a connection between them that must occur first, so long as you wear that pendant, it will not happen."

John shook his head. "I don't understand. You say I will go to her whether she can see me or not. How do you know that?"

"How can you not know?" the old man asked, unperturbed. "Can you be content just to be near her? Almost close enough to touch and never touching? Speaking to her, perhaps, and yet never letting her see your face? Can your love be satisfied with this and nothing more?"

It was several long moments before John could reply. "No."

"Then be quiet and listen—go down the path to the pool when the mist forms and greet the Lady by her name. Alisandra."

John shook his head again. "You could have learned my name or Matthew's in the village, somehow, but how by all that's holy can you know the name of my love?" John asked.

"As I said—I know everyone. Though it's more accurate to say that Alisandra was once the Lady's name. There is a chance that it has been too long, that she will not remember, and in that case I advise you to simply remove the pendant and end your longing, since then there is truly no hope."

"And if she does remember?"

"If she does, she will hold out her hand to you, even though she cannot see you. Do not take her hand yet, no matter how tempted you may be. Simply talk to her."

"That is all?"

"That is a great deal. Take your leave of her when you may, then return the next evening. Do this for three nights. On the third night, if you really are in love with her, you will hear the Lady in White weep."

"In sorrow for those she has killed?" John asked.

"In sorrow," the old man said, "for herself. She has reason enough. When that happens, the Lady herself will tell you what you must do to end her suffering, and she will offer her hand again. This time you must take it and, no matter what happens, do not let go. This is very important. Do you understand?"

John nodded, and the old man got up. He did not offer his hand but simply said, "Good luck to you, John Alby."

John looked thoughtful. "If you are who you say you are, then the Lady in White does much work that should be good in your eyes. Why would you seek to end that?"

"You don't know what I seek, John Alby. All you do need to know is that I have told you the truth in all things. Remember that, should it prove necessary."

THE NEXT EVENING CAME AND, DESPITE HIS MISgivings, John walked past the hill and its log seat and continued down the path toward the haunted pool. Already the mist was gathering, as it always did, though the Lady herself had not appeared. John touched the pendant around his neck, though he did not take very much comfort in it.

He offered me hope, and I could not refuse. In a few moments we will know if the old man was really telling the truth.

The proof was quick and sure coming, in that the White Lady did not appear at all. The mist was there, and John was there, his feet bare inches from the water, but the White Lady was not. John took a gusting breath of relief, and in that moment the mist began to coalesce. John saw a pair of dark eyes and a flow of white mist that might have been hair. He almost cried out in his fear, but he remembered what the old man had said, and what had happened the previous night.

She can't see me. She can only hear me.

Still not fully formed, the White Lady was searching the shore around the path, looking but, John was now certain, not seeing. So the old man had told the truth about the pendant. Now John had to find out if he had told the truth about everything else. He kept his voice even and pleasant, though the effort cost him.

"Lady Alisandra. Give you good evening."

The mist contracted suddenly and floated a bit higher over the water. John had never seen that before. If this had not been the White Lady, perhaps something closer to human, or at least closer to having a memory of being human, John would have sworn that it was afraid.

"I mean you no harm, Lady Alisandra," John said, and immediately felt foolish, but the words had an effect. The mist lowered slightly, and John could see Alisandra's black eyes again, peering intently at the shore.

"Lady Alisandra, I've come to—"

"Please don't say that name again."

The voice was like a cry of pain, but it filled John with hope. "You remember."

"Yes. Who are you? Why do you torment me?"

"My name is John Alby. I'm sorry if the mention of your name hurts you, that was not my intent."

"Why can't I see you?" she asked.

"I am hidden."

The specter held out her hand, but John remembered and he did not touch her. After a moment she lowered it again, but the image of the lady was clear now. She smiled sadly. "It is good that you are hidden, or you would surely die."

He nodded, forgetting that she couldn't see him. "Why do you do that?" John asked. "Why do you kill the men who come to you?"

"I kill no one. It is my nature that men will seek me out and the nature of my current ... condition that I must seek them in turn. I cannot prevent it, yet I know they die because of me."

"Do you enjoy their deaths?"

The sad smile again. "Enjoy? I enjoy nothing, John Alby. I do not ask you to understand, but if there is any human kindness within you, then please either reveal yourself or go away. Do not add to my suffering."

John saw the pain on his love's face and the sight was breaking his heart. "I do not wish you to suffer. I wish to aid you in any way that I can."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "Please go," she said, and started to fade.

"Wait!" John said, but in a moment there was nothing over the pool but mist.

THE NEXT EVENING JOHN FOUND A FRIGHTENED BUT determined young man walking down the path.

"Rather young to go to your death," John said.

"I'm not afraid," the boy said. "I'll prove it to them ..."

John nodded cheerfully. "Ah, a dare. Of course."

John didn't bother trying to reason with the lad; he simply clouted him over the head and left him tied to one of the alders beside the path. John didn't feel particularly noble about taking such a new and drastic step; he knew his good intentions were matched by his desire that the boy not interfere. When he was certain the boy would not be following him, he continued down toward the pool where the Lady in White was waiting.

The boy will not be coming," he said.

Alisandra shrugged. "I saw him walking, then he stopped, then fell down and dragged himself off and tied himself to a tree. It was a very odd sight, John Alby, but I suppose he has you to thank for his salvation."

John shrugged. "One less death for your conscience to bear."

"One pebble in a landslide is meaningless, John Alby."

"I don't think that's true."

"No?" Again Alisandra held out her hand to him, and again John refused to take it, though he wanted to reach out and comfort her in any way possible.

She sighed, and lowered her hand again. "Why do you torment me? Has someone you cared for come to embrace me? Is this revenge?"

"How am I tormenting you? Is my presence so distasteful?"

"Yes," she said frankly. "You remind me of what I am not. You speak kindly to me. Why do you do this, John Alby? Why do you want to help me?"

"I love you," he said.

"You are a fool," she said.

John nodded affably. "No doubt. Yet there is the matter in a nutshell, Lady Alisandra."

She shuddered. "I asked you not to say that name. For pity's sake

"For pity's sake? Not a bit of it. I shall remember that name, even if you do not wish to. I will say it with love so you can hear. I want to shout it from the mountain!"

She shuddered again. "Please don't. Please go away."

"If that is your wish, then I will do so. But I will return tomorrow," he said.

"If you really love me, you will not return," she said.

"I don't believe you mean that," John said.

"Then it seems I must be doubly a captive of my sorry state and of what you believe. Until tomorrow, John Alby."

Once more she vanished into mist. John went back to the alder tree, threw the cursing boy over his shoulder, and carried him back to his mother.

I HAVE LITTLE TO OFFER, BUT WHAT I HAVE IS YOURS

John fiddled with the beginnings of a speech, what he would say to Alisandra when the final task was done. He had not totally abandoned sense, but hope was a powerful force and he couldn't help but think of what was to come afterwards. Would she love him? She had not said so. Perhaps she would learn? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. There were possibilities aborning now, and all wanted to be heard, both the good and the bad.

"Not yet," John said aloud as he walked down the path. He would not think of them yet. He would not plan speeches, or children, or what Alisandra would wear to Maying Day or their wedding. So much not to think about; it was very difficult. John almost didn't notice when he'd reached the pond.

Alisandra was already there. Weeping. So far, everything was going as the old man had said.

"P-please, no more. All those things you want me to be, that you believe I am ... I can't stand it anymore, John Alby."

"Give me your hand," he said, relentless. "It's time."

"You know of that? Who told you?"

"An old man I met near the path. He knew much about you."

She stopped crying then, though for a time the tears remained, glistening on her cheeks. "Yes, I suppose he would."

"He called himself Death, but I do not believe that. Do you know him?" John asked. "Is he a friend of yours? An enemy? Does he wish you ill?"

She shook her head. "No more questions now. You have been counseled well, but you have not been told everything. There is more you need to understand."

"I want to," John said.

She smiled then. "Long ago I was a human woman, a sorceress, and my name was indeed Alisandra. Magic was my pride, but I was beautiful as well, and that was my undoing. Two powerful lovers courted me, and I could not choose between them, so I fled both. I fled until there was nowhere else to run in all the world."

"What happened then?"

"I fled the world," she said simply. "I used my skills and I opened a way out and escaped ... or so I thought." John waited, silently, and finally she went on. "Where I am and where I came from both became unbalanced once I crossed over. There is a rift between the worlds over this pond, and nothing of me except my longing can cross it unaided. That is what the Lady in White truly is, John Alby. Not a ghost—a memory. Men mistake the longing for something it is not, and they die."

"I do not know what you are or might be," John said, "and I do not care. I only know that I love you."

Her dark eyes glittered. "If that is true, then you can do something no one else can do, match my longing with your own. You can reach across the abyss and bring me home. If you take my hand now and hold tight, I will be able to cross this rift and be mortal again."

"Truly? What about your lovers?"

She smiled a little shyly. "Is that jealousy?"

John blushed. "Well ... perhaps a little."

"It was long ago, John. Though there is one thing I must warn you about—for a time we will be neither of this world nor your own, but moving between them. Just as I come to meet you, there is something of you that will come to me. At that point we are both vulnerable, do you understand?"

"I don't think so," John said. "Vulnerable to what?"

She looked away. "Many things, but mostly the men who have died here. It is likely that some of them cannot rest and they walk between, neither of this world nor yours. They will be able to reach me then, and they will try to make you let go of me so that they may

seek their revenge. I can't promise that you won't be hurt, or that you won't be afraid, but I do promise that, if you hold tight, they cannot stop us. If you let me go one moment before I tell you to, then I am lost."

John licked his lips. "I won't let that happen. I swear it. I will trust you to know when the time is right."

"As I must trust you, John, since it seems there's no escaping you."

John reddened again, but Alisandra smiled as she said it, and he could sense no resentment in her. He hoped he was right; he did not want her to think ill of him and confuse his devotion for something less worthy. "I hope you will have no more reason to grieve on my account, and I swear I will make you happy—"

She lifted a finger to her lips, silencing him. "Swear nothing to me, save that you will be guided by me, and do as I say."

"I swear," he said.

"Well then. Let's have it done."

Alisandra held out her hand again, and this time John took it. He gasped as their fingers touched, she felt as ethereal as mist and yet he could hold her. Her touch was like ice and yet he did not let go. After a moment or two the worst of the cold and the wrongness of her touch began to fade. At first he thought she was growing more substantial, and perhaps she was, but he had changed as well. The world around him seemed unreal. He almost believed he could see a pebble on the bank of the pool directly beneath his shoe, but he forgot about both the pebble and the shoe as he gazed at Alisandra.

She had left her position floating over the pond and now stood in front of him on the shore. She was not now the cold and deadly beauty he had seen through the rift, she was still beautiful, yes, and her hair just as white, her eyes still as dark. Yet her hand was now warm in his, and John fancied he saw the human woman now and not the specter. She smiled at him, as if sensing his thoughts.

"Yes, John Alby. If you're less real now, I am more so. That's the true that he was no more than a purpose now, that purpose was thwarted and could not be sustained. Matthew began to fade away, and in a moment or two he was gone. John was relieved but did not relinquish his grip on Alisandra's hand. There were others; she had said so, and John knew it must be true—scores of men had gone to their deaths over the years at Alisandra's pool. There would be more.

Alisandra smiled at him. "It won't be long now."

John looked around, but so far as he could see the world he remembered still seemed pale and ghostly. "I can't tell that we've moved any closer to our true world."

"I wasn't talking about that, though what you're referring to will happen soon enough." From the distant shadows John heard the baying of hounds, and Alisandra sighed. "Hurry, my love."

John could not hurry, could not do anything save what he had sworn to do. It was a moment or two before he had the cold, immovable understanding that Alisandra was not talking to him. "Who is coming? The other men who died here?"

She nodded. "Those unhappy souls for certain, I can feel them rushing to find me, but they will not find me before he does. Thank you, John Alby. I am in your debt."

"He? I don't understand."

"You will shortly. You won't forgive me, but remember that I didn't ask for your love."

"There's nothing coming but hounds!"

"And their master," she said.

The baying was a loud chorus now. John could see the hounds' red eyes as they coursed through the shadows, ever closer. He understood then. A pack of hounds moving between this world and the next could only be one particular pack.

"No wonder the ghosts of the other men who died here are so scattered, they had to flee the hunting pack!"

She nodded. "There are still many, as I said, but not so many as

HIS VOICE, FOR ALL THE FIRE IN HIS EYES, WAS NOTHING... MORE THAN A WHISPER OF THE WIND IN THE REEDS.

rift trying to heal itself." She looked away from him, then listened intently. "He's coming."

"Who is?" John asked.

"One of many." Alisandra said, "but probably the most recent."

It was Matthew Sanger.

John saw him drifting through the reeds. He looked by turns as solid as a brick and as fleeting as smoke. He seemed to be snuffing the wind like a blind dog, but he came on unerringly toward them.

"Matthew! Stay back!" John shouted, but Alisandra shook her head. "He won't hear you. There's little left of him now except a purpose. Hold tight!"

Matthew came on, ignoring John completely. John wasn't even sure if Matthew could see him. The shade of the burly blacksmith grabbed hold of Alisandra's right arm and pulled.

"Mine!"

His voice, for all the fire in his eyes, was nothing more than a whisper of the wind in the reeds. John braced himself against the pull, afraid that Matthew would snatch Alisandra from him as easily as he'd brushed John off on the pool path, but this was not like before. Matthew was only a shadow with a purpose and John, though hovering between worlds, was more his match this time. John grimaced against the strain but held fast. He saw the pain in Alisandra's eyes as Matthew's hand dug into her arm, but John did not let go. Matthew clawed at John's arm, unseeing, like someone trying to free a piece of clothing caught in a snag. John felt Matthew's cold hard nails rake his flesh, he cried out but held firm.

"Mine ..." The voice was despairing now.

"I won't let go, Matthew," John said, though it was more to reassure Alisandra. Matthew did not listen and did not let go, but if it was there were. No one evades the hunter forever."

John saw them coming, knew there was no escape. "What shall we do?"

Alisandra didn't answer for a moment, and he thought at first he hadn't heard her. She peered into the darkness and smiled. "Ah. There."

John saw it too: a ghostly rider on a horse darker than night. His eyes were redder than the hounds'. Alisandra turned back to look at John in triumph. "What shall we do? I'll tell you—we shall part, John Alby. Let me go. Now."

"Alisandra..." He heard the despair in his own voice and could change nothing.

"Now!"

Alisandra slapped him hard and he did release her, more from shock and surprise than intent. He immediately reached for her again, but it was already too late. The pack parted around her as she ran toward the huntsman. In a moment she was beyond his sight and the pack closed in. Yet as they did, they grew fainter, ghostly. John felt the living world rushing back to him like a strong wind, but the pack was rushing harder. He cried out as spectral jaws opened with teeth white and sharp to rend and tear, but they closed on nothing. The rift healed itself from one moment to the next and soon even the sound of the pack was fading to nothing.

John stood on the bank of the pond, staring off into darkness, but he wasn't alone. John heard footsteps behind him.

"Alisandra?"

"I'm afraid not."

The old man stood on the path behind him. He put his hands on his hips and stared off into the shadows at something John could not

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The Language of Moths

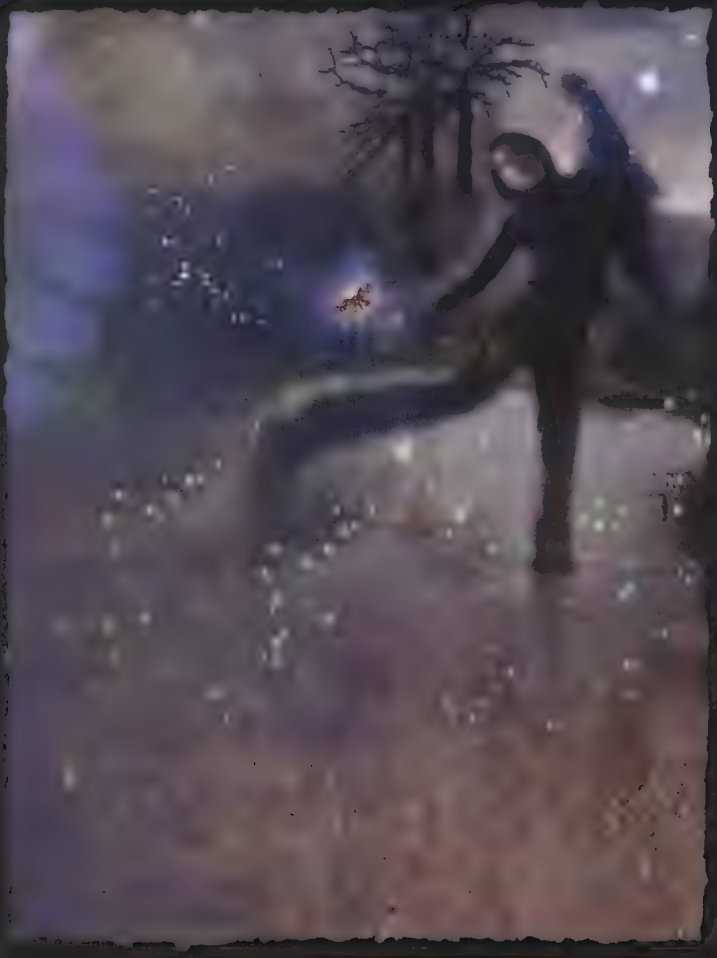
Sometimes you need to learn a new language to bridge a gap.
But sometimes you need to forget an old one.

By Christopher Barzak
Illustration by Eric Dinyer

1. Swallowing Bubbles

The four of them had been traveling for what seemed like forever, the two in the front seat rattling maps like they did newspapers on Sunday mornings. They rode in the wagon, her favorite car, the one with the wood paneling on its doors. The wagon wound through the twisty backroads of the mountains, leaving behind it clouds of dust through which sunlight passed, making the air shimmer like liquid gold. The girl wanted the wagon to stop so she could jump out and run through the golden light behind her. She climbed halfway over the back seat and pushed her face against the rear window, trying to get a better look.

The little old man beside her shouted, "No! No! No! Sit down, you're slobbering all over the glass. Sit down this instant!" He grabbed her around her waist and pulled her back into a sitting position. He pulled a strap across her chest, locking it with a decisive click. The little old man narrowed his eyes; he waved a finger in the girl's face. He said things at her. But as his words left his lips, they became bubbles. Large silver bubbles that shimmied and wobbled in the air. The bubbles filled the car in mere moments. So many words all at once! The girl laughed delightedly. She popped some of the bubbles between her fingers. Others she plucked from the air and swallowed like grapes. She let them sit sweetly on her tongue for a while, before taking them all the way in for good. When the bubbles reached her stomach, they burst into music. The sound of them echoed through her body, reverberating. She rang like a bell. One day, when she swallowed enough bubbles, she might understand what the little old man beside her was saying. All of the time, not just now and then. Maybe she'd even be able to say things back to him. She wondered if her own words would taste as sweet. Like honey, maybe. Or like flowers.



2. Being Selfish

Eliot is watching his mother hang bed sheets from a cord of clothesline she's tied off at two walls facing opposite of each other in their cabin. "To give us all a sense of personal space," she explains. Eliot tells his mother that this cabin is so small, hanging up bed sheets to section off rooms is a futile activity. "Where did you learn that word," his mother asks. "Futile. Who taught you that?"

"At school," Eliot says, paging through an *X Men* comic book, not bothering to look up.

His mother makes a face that looks impressed. "Maybe public school isn't so bad after all," she says. "Your father was right, as usual."

Eliot doesn't know if his father is right, or even if his father is usually right, as his mother seems to imagine. After all, here they are in the Allegheny Mountains, in Pennsylvania, for God's sake, hundreds of miles away from home. Away from Boston. And for what? For a figment of his father's imagination. For a so-called undiscovered moth his father claims to have seen when he was Eliot's age, fourteen, camping right here in this very cabin. Eliot doesn't believe his father could remember anything that far back, and even if he could, his memory of the event could be completely fictional at this point, an indulgence in nostalgia for a time when his life still seemed open in all directions, flat as a map, unexplored and waiting for him.

Eliot's father is an entomologist. His specialty is lepidoptera, moths and butterflies and what Eliot thinks of as creepy-crawlies, things that spin cocoons around themselves when they're unhappy with their present circumstances and wait inside their shells until either they've changed or the world has, before coming out. Eliot's father is forty-three years old, a once-celebrated researcher on the mating habits of moths found in the Appalachian Mountains. He is also a liar. He lied to his grant committee at the college, telling them in his proposal that he required the funds for this expedition to research the habits of a certain species of moth with which they were all familiar. He didn't mention his undiscovered moth, the one that glowed orange and pink, as he once told Eliot during a reverie, with his eyes looking at something unimaginably distant while he spoke of it. Maybe, Eliot thinks, an absurd adventure like this one is a scientist's version of a mid-life crisis. Instead of chasing after other women, Eliot's father is chasing after a moth that, let's face it, he probably imagined.

"There now, isn't that better?" Eliot's mother stands in the center of the cabin, which she has finished sectioning into four rooms. The cabin is a perfect square with clothesline bisecting the center in both directions, like a plus sign. Eliot owns one corner, and Dawn, his sister, has the one next to his. That makes up one half of the cabin. The other half has been divided into the kitchen and his parents' space. The sheet separating Eliot's corner from his sister's is patterned with blue flowers and tiny teacups. These sheets are Dawn's favorites, and secretly, Eliot's too.

Eliot's mother glances around, smiling vaguely, wiping sweat off of her brow. She's obviously happy with her achievement. After all, she's an academic, a philosopher, unaccustomed to cleaning house and rigging up clotheslines and bed linen. The maid back in Boston—back home, Eliot thinks—Marcy, she helps around the house with domestic things like that. Usually Eliot's mother uses her mind to speculate on how the mind works, not just her own mind—but *the* mind—the idea of what a mind is. Now she finds herself using her mental prowess to tidy up a ramshackle cabin. Who would have guessed she'd be so capable? So *practical?* Not Eliot. Certainly not herself.

The door to the cabin swings open, flooding the room with bright sunlight that makes Eliot squint. He shields his eyes with one hand, like an officer saluting, to witness the shadowy figure of his father's body filling the doorframe, and his sister Dawn trailing behind.

Dawn is more excited than usual, which has made this trip something less than a vacation. For Eliot's father, Dr. Carroll, it was never a vacation; that was a well-known fact. For Dr. Carroll, this was an expedition, possibly his last chance to inscribe his name in History. But the rest of the family was supposed to "take things easy and enjoy themselves." When Dr. Carroll said that, Eliot had snorted. Dr. Carroll had placed his hands on his hips and glowered. "Why the attitude, Eliot?" he'd asked.

"Take it *easy*." Eliot repeated in a squeaky-scratchy voice that never failed to surface when he most needed to appear justified and righteous. "How can you expect us to do that with Dawn around?"

Dr. Carroll had stalked away, not answering, which didn't surprise Eliot at all. For most of his life, this is what Eliot has seen whenever he questions his father: his father's back, walking away, leaving a room full of silence.

Dawn pushes past Dr. Carroll and runs over to Eliot's cot. She jumps on the mattress, which squeals on old coils, and throws her arms across the moth eaten pink quilt. The quilt smells of mold and mildew and something a little like mothballs, as if it had been stored in a cedar chest for a long time. Dawn turns to Eliot, her wide blue eyes set in a face as white and smooth as porcelain, and smiles at him, her blonde hair fanning out on the pillow. Eliot considers her over the top of his comic book, pretending not to have noticed her.

Dawn is autistic. She's seventeen years old, three years older than Eliot. But when she's around, Eliot feels as if he's already an old man, forced into an early maturity, responsible for things no fourteen year old boy should have to think about. He blames this all on his parents, who often encourage him when he pays attention to Dawn, who often scold him when he wants something for himself. "Being selfish," is what his mother calls that, leaving Eliot dashed to pieces on the rocks of guilt. He feels guilty even now, trying to read the last page of his comic book instead of paying attention to Dawn.

"I'm leaving," Dr. Carroll announces. He's wearing khaki pants with pockets all over them, and a wide-brimmed hat with mosquito netting pulled down over his face. A backpack and sleeping bag are slung on his back. He lifts the mosquito netting and kisses Eliot's mother on her cheek and calls her Dr. Carroll affectionately, then looks at Eliot and says, "You take care of Dawn while I'm away, Eliot. Stay out of trouble."

He walks outside, and all of them—Eliot, Dawn and their mother—move to the doorway. As if magnetized by Dr. Carroll's absence, they try to fill the space he's left. They watch him become smaller and smaller, a shadow, until he reaches the trail that will take him farther into the graying mountains, where his moth awaits.

"Good luck," Eliot's mother whispers, waving goodbye to his back, his nets and pockets. She closes her eyes and says, "Please," to something she cannot name, even though she no longer believes in higher powers, ghosts or gods of any sort.

3. First Words

It was strange for the girl in this place; she hadn't been prepared for it. Suddenly the wagon had come to a stop and they all spilled out. The mother and the father, they seemed so excited. They smiled so hard, their faces split in half. The little old man kept scowling; he was so funny. She patted him on his shoulder and he opened his mouth to make room for one huge silver bubble to escape. She grabbed hold of its silky surface and almost left the ground as it floated upwards, towards the clouds. But it popped, and she rocked back on her heels laughing. When the bubble popped, it shouted, "Get off!"

The father left soon after. The girl was a little frightened at first. Like maybe the father would never come back? Did the father still love her? These thoughts frightened her more than anything else. But then she watched the little old man chop wood for the fire, his skinny arms struggling each time he lifted the axe above his head, which made her laugh, sweeping the fear out of her like the mother sweeping dirt off the front porch. Swish! Goodbye, fear! Good riddance! She forgot the father because the little old man made her

Laugh so much

There were so many trees here, the girl thought she'd break her neck from tilting her head back to see their swaying tops. Also, strange sounds burrowed into her skin, and she shivered a lot. Birds singing, crickets creeking. This little thing no bigger than the nail of her pinky—it had transparent wings and hovered by her ear, buzzing a nasty song. She swatted at it, but it kept returning. It followed her wherever she went. Finally the mother saw it and squashed it in a Kleenex. But as it died, it told the girl, "You've made a horrible mistake. I am not the enemy." Then it coughed, sputtered, and was dead

The girl thought of the wagon. It was still one of her favorite things in the world. But now she was thinking she wasn't so sure. Maybe there were other things just as special as riding in the wagon with the mother, the father and the little old man. She wished the mother wouldn't have killed the winged creature so quick. She wanted it to tell her more things, but now it was dead and its last words still rang in her ears. When the winged creature spoke, no bubbles came out of its mouth. Words, pure and clear, like cold water, filled her up. The winged creature had more words for her, she just knew it. She knew this without knowing why, and she didn't care. She only cared that the bubbles didn't come between her and the words when the creature spoke to her. One drink of that and she wanted more

4. The Scream

Before Eliot's father left, he placed him in charge of Dawn, and his mother seems more than willing to follow her husband's orders to the letter, leaving Eliot to look after Dawn while she sits on the front porch of the cabin, or in the kitchen, and writes. Eliot finds his mother's loyalty to his father's declarations an annoying trait, as if she had no say-so about anything when it comes to her children, she simply goes along with whatever his father says. He's watched Dawn every day since his father left, which has been for an entire week. He's taken her on the trails that are clearly marked, they've stared into the shallow depths of a creek where the water was as dark as tea, where red and blue crayfish skittered for cover under rocks. He's introduced Dawn to grasshoppers, which she loved immediately and, to Eliot's amazement, coaxed into a perfect line, making them leap in time together, like figure skaters. He was proud of Dawn for that, and could tell she was too; she looked up at him after the synchronized leap went off without a hitch and clapped her hands for a full minute

Each day they pick wildflowers together, which, when they return in the late afternoons, hang tattered and limp in Dawn's grip. Still, their mother takes them from Dawn gratefully when they're offered. "Oh, they're beautiful," she says, and puts the ragged daisies and buttercups in empty Coke bottles, filling the cabin with their bittersweet scent

Eliot never gives his mother flowers. He leaves that pleasure for Dawn. And anyway, he knows something Dawn doesn't: his mother doesn't even like flowers, and Dr. Carroll doesn't even give them to her for Valentine's day or for their wedding anniversary. Eliot has to admit that his mother's graciousness in the face of receiving a gift she doesn't like is a mark of her tact and love for Dawn. He couldn't ever be so nice. He watches his mother and Dawn find "just the right place" for the flowers and thinks, I am a bad person. He thinks this because he's imagined himself far away, not from his present location in the mountains, but far away from his family itself. He's imagined himself in a place of his own, with furniture and a TV set and his own books. In none of these fantasies does his mother or father appear, except for the occasional phone call. He never misses them and he wonders if this means he's a wrong person somehow. Shouldn't children love their parents enough to call every once in a while? Apparently in these fantasies, parents aren't that important.

Dawn isn't a part of these fantasies either. Eliot doesn't even imagine phone calls from her because, really, what would be the use? At most, Dawn might latch onto a phrase and ask him it over and over. She might say, like she once did at his twelfth birthday party, "How old is your cat?" sending all of his friends into fits of laughter.

Eliot doesn't have a cat.

Eliot's mother has begun a new essay, and during the day, she spends her time reading essays and books written by other philosophers and scientists who she thinks has something to say on the subject she's considering. "This one," she tells Eliot one morning, "will be a feminist revision of *Walden*. I think it has great potential."

She's packed her Thoreau, Eliot realizes, irritation suddenly tingling at the base of his neck. He's beginning to suspect that, this summer, he has become the victim of a conspiracy got up by his parents, a conspiracy that will leave him the sole caretaker of Dawn. Within the frame of a few seconds he's turned red and his skin has started to itch. He's close to yelling at his mother. He wants to accuse her of this conspiracy, to call her out, so to speak. To scold her for being selfish. I could do that, he thinks. Scold his parents. He's done it before and he'll do it again. He finds nothing wrong with that, sometimes they deserve to be reprimanded. Why does everyone think that because someone gives birth to you and is older, they inherently deserve your respect? Eliot decided a long time ago that he wouldn't respect his parents unless they respected him. Sometimes this becomes a problem.

Before he unleashes his penned-up tensions though, his mother stops scribbling and lifts her face from her notebook. She smiles at Eliot and says, "Why don't you go into that village we passed on the way in and make some friends? You've been doing so well with your sister. You deserve a break."

She gives Eliot ten dollars from her purse, which he crumples into a wad in his front pocket. She's releasing him for the day, and though he's still fuming over the conspiracy, he runs at this window of chance. He grabs his bike and trots with it at his side for a minute, before leaping onto its sun-warmed seat. Then he peddles away, down the mountain.

When he thinks he's far enough away, Eliot screams at the top of his lungs, an indecipherable noise that echoes and echoes in this silent wooded place. The scream hangs over the mountainside like a cloud of black smoke, a stain on the clear sky, following Eliot for the rest of the day. Like some homeless mutt he's been nice to without thinking about the consequences, the scream will follow him forever now, seeking more affection, wanting to be a permanent part of his life.

5. The Butterfly's Question

The girl found the butterflies by accident. They were swarming in a small green field splashed yellow, white, and orange from their wings. She ran out to meet them, stretched out her fingertips to touch them, and they flitted onto her arms, dusted her face with pollen, kissed her forehead and said,

"Child, where have you been?"

The butterfly that spoke to her was large, and its wings were a burnt orange color, spider-webbed with black veins. It floated unsteadily in front of her face, cocking its head back and forth as if examining her. No silver bubbles came out of its mouth when it spoke, just like the first winged creature, just like the grasshoppers who performed their leaps, their little tricks just for her pleasure.

"Well?" The butterfly circled her head once.

"I don't know," Dawn said. "It's hard to explain. But there are these people. They take care of me really nice."

"I would expect nothing less," said the butterfly, coming to rest on the back of her wrist. It stayed there for a while, its wings moving back and forth slowly, fanning itself. Finally, it crawled up the length of the girl's arm and came to rest on her shoulder. It whispered in her ear, "Why now? Why have they brought you too us now, so late in your life?"

The girl didn't know how to answer the butterfly. She simply looked down at her bare feet in the high grass and shrugged. "I don't know," she told the butterfly, and nearly started crying. But

the butterfly brushed her cheek with its wings and said, "No, no. Don't cry, my love. Everything in its own time. Everything in its own time. Now isn't that right?"

6. Centipede

When Eliot rode into the village his first thought was *What a dump.* When they passed through it a week ago, they had driven through without stopping, and he figured his father must have been speeding because he hadn't noticed how sad this so-called village is. It has one miserable main street running through the center, a general store called Mac's, a gas station that serves ice cream inside, and a bar called Murdock's Place. Other than that, the rest of the town is made up of family cemeteries and ramshackle farms. The Amish have a community just a few miles out of town, and the occasional horse-drawn buggy *clop-clops* it way down the main street, carrying inside its bonnet girls wearing dark blue dresses and men with bushy beards and straw hats.

Inside Mac's general store, Eliot is playing *Centipede,* an incredibly archaic arcade game from the 1980s. He has to play the game with an old trackball, which is virtually extinct in the arcade world, and it only has one button to push for laser beam attacks. Ridiculous, thinks Eliot. Uncivilized. This is the end of the world, he thinks, imagining the world to be flat, like the first explorers described it, where, in the furthest outposts of undiscovered country, the natives play *Centipede* and sell ice cream in gas stations, traveling from home to school in horse-drawn buggies. He misses his computer in Boston, which offers far more sophisticated diversions. Games where you actually have to think, he thinks.

The front screen door to Mac's squeals open then bangs shut. Mac, the man behind the counter with the brown wart on his nose and the receding hairline, couldn't have oiled the hinges for ages. Probably not since the place was first built. Eliot looks over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of the tall town boy who just entered, standing at the front counter, talking to Mac. He's pale as milk in the gloom of Mac's dusty store, and his hair looks almost colorless. More like fiber optics than hair, Eliot thinks, clear as plastic filaments. Mac calls the boy Roy, and rings up a tin of chewing tobacco on the cash register. Another piece of pre-history, Eliot thinks. This place doesn't even have price scanners, which have been around for how long? Like more than twenty years at least.

Eliot turns back to his game to find he's been killed because of his carelessness. That's okay though, because he still has one life left to lose and, anyway, he doesn't have to feel like a failure because the game is so absurd that he doesn't even care anymore. He starts playing again anyway, spinning the trackball in its orbit, but suddenly he feels someone breathing on the back of his neck. He stops moving the trackball. He looks over his shoulder to find Roy standing behind him.

"Watch out!" Roy says, pointing a grease-stained finger at the video screen. Eliot turns back and saves himself by the skin of his teeth. "You almost bought it there," says Roy in a congratulatory manner, as if Eliot has passed some sort of manhood rite in which near-death experiences are a standard. Roy sends a stream of brown spit splashing against the back corner of the arcade game and Eliot grins without knowing why. He's thinking this kid Roy is a real loser, trashy and yet somehow brave to spit on Mac's property when Mac is only a few steps away. Guys like this are enigmas to Eliot. They frighten him, piss him off for how easy-going they act, fire his imagination in ways that embarrass him. He abhors them, he wants to be more like them, he wants them to want to be more like him; he wants them to tell him they want to be more like him, so he can admit to his own desire for aspects of their own personalities. Shit, he thinks. What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I think these things?

After another minute, Eliot crashes yet another life, and the arcade game bleeps wearily, asking for another quarter for another chance. Eliot turns to Roy and asks, "You want a turn?"

Up close, he can see Roy's eyes are green, and his hair is brown, not colorless. In fact, Eliot decides, in the right light, Roy's hair may even be auburn, reddish-brown, like leaves in autumn.

Roy gives Eliot this dirty grin that makes him appear like he's onto Eliot about something. His lips curl back from his teeth. His nostrils flare, then retract. He's caught the scent of something. "No," he tells Eliot, still grinning. "Why don't we do something else instead?"

Eliot is already nodding. He doesn't know what he's agreed to, but he's willing to sign on the dotted line without reading the small print. It doesn't matter, he's thinking. He's only wondering what Roy's hair will look like outside, out of the dark of Mac's store, out in the sunlight.

7. Do You Understand Me?

The mother came out of nowhere, and the girl looked frantically around the field for a place to hide, as if she'd been caught doing something bad, or was naked, like that man and woman in the garden with the snake. Sometimes, the grandma who babysat for the mother and the father would tell the girl that story and say, "Dear you are wiser than all of us. You did not bite that apple." The grandma would pet the girl's hair, as if she were a dog or a cat.

The mother said, "Dawn! What are you doing so far away?"

Roy sends a stream of brown spit splashing against the back corner of the arcade game and Eliot grins without knowing why.

I've been looking for you everywhere! You know you're not supposed to wander." The mother was suddenly upon the girl then, and she grabbed hold of her wrist, tight. "Come on," said the mother. "Let's go back to the cabin. I've got work to do. You can't run off like this. Do you understand me? Dawn! Understand?"

The mother and father were always talking about work. The girl didn't know what work was, but she thought it was probably something like when she had to go to the special school, where the Mrs. Albert made her say, "B is for book, B. B is for bat, B. B is for butterfly, B. Buh, buh, buh." It was a little annoying. But the girl was given a piece of candy each time she repeated the Mrs. Albert correctly. The candy made the buh, buh, buhs worth saying.

The mother tugged on the girl's wrist and they left the field together. The girl struggled against her mother's grip, but could not break it. Behind her, the butterflies all waved their wings goodbye, winking in the high grass and yellow-white flowers like stars in the sky at night. The girl waved back with her free hand, and the butterflies started to fly towards her, as if she'd issued them a command. They ushered the mother and girl out of their field, flapping behind the girl like a banner.

When they reached the cabin, the girl saw that the little old man was back again. Something was funny about him now, but it was-

n't the kind of funny that usually made her laugh. Something was different. He didn't look so old anymore maybe, as if all the adulthood had drained out of his normally pinched looking face. He didn't even scold her when she ran up to him and squealed at him, pointing out the difference to him, in case he hadn't noticed it himself. The little old man didn't seem to be bothered by anything now, not the girl, nor the mother. His eyes looked always somewhere else, far away, like the father's. Off in the distance. The mother asked the little old man, "How was your day?" and the little old man replied, "Great."

This was a shock for the girl. The little old man *never* sounded so happy. He went into the cabin to take a nap. The girl was curious, so she clambed onto the porch and peered through the window that looked down on the little old man's cot. He was lying on his back, arms crossed behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His face suddenly broke into a smile, and the girl cocked her head, wondering why he would ever do that. Then she realized: He'd found something like she had with the insects, and it made her happy for them both.

The little old man stopped staring at the ceiling. He stared at the girl, his eyes warning signals to keep her distance, but he didn't yell like he usually did. The girl nodded, then backed away from the window slowly. She didn't want to ruin his happiness.

8. Life in the Present Tense

Eliot and Roy are sitting in the rusted-out shell of a 1969 Corvette, once painted red, now rotted away to the browns of rust. The corvette rests in the back of a scrap metal junkyard on the edge of town, which Roy's uncle owns. His uncle closes the place down every afternoon at five o'clock sharp. Now it's nine o'clock at night, and the only light available comes from the moon, and from the orange glow on the cherry of Roy's cigarette.

Eliot is holding a fifth of Jim Beam whiskey in his right hand. The bottle is half empty. He lifts it to his lips and drinks. The whiskey slides down his throat, warm and bitter, and explodes in his stomach, heating his body, flushing his skin bright red. He and Roy started drinking over an hour ago, taking shots, daring each other to take another, then another, until they were both good and drunk. It's the first time for Eliot.

"We need to find something to do," Roy says, exhaling a plume of smoke. "Jeez, this'd be better if we'd at least have a radio or something."

"It's all right," Eliot says, trying to calm Roy down before he works himself up. He and Roy have been hanging out together relentlessly for the past few weeks. Here's one thing Eliot's discovered about Roy. He gets angry over little things fast. Things that aren't really problems. Like not having music in the junkyard while they drink. Roy's never satisfied with what's available. His mind constantly seeks out what could make each moment better than it is, rather than focusing on the moment itself. Roy lives in the future imperfect, Eliot's realized, while Eliot mainly lives in the present tense.

"I hate this town," Roy says, taking the bottle from Eliot. He sips some of the whiskey, then takes a fast and hard gulp. "Ahh," he hisses. He turns to Eliot and smiles, all teeth. His smile is almost perfect, except for one of his front teeth is pushed out a little further than the other, slightly crooked. But it suits him somehow, Eliot thinks.

"I don't know," Eliot shrugs. "I kind of like it here. It's better than being up on that stupid mountain with my parents. They're enough to drive you up a wall."

"Or to drink," says Roy, lifting the bottle again, and they both laugh.

"Yeah," Eliot says, smiling back at Roy. He leans back to rest his head against the seat and looks up through the rusted-out roof of the Corvette, where the stars pour through, reeling and circling above them, as though some invisible force is stirring them up. "It's not like this in Boston," Eliot says. "Most of the time you can't even see the stars because of the city lights."

"In Boston," Roy mimics, his voice whiney and filled with a slight sneer. "All you talk about is Boston. You know, Boston isn't everything. It's not the only place in the world."

"I know," Eliot says. "I was just trying to say exactly that. You know, how I can't see the stars there like I can here?"

"Oh," Roy says, and looks down into his lap.

Eliot pats him on the shoulder and tells him not to get all sad. "We're having fun," Eliot says. "Everything's great."

Roy agrees and then Eliot goes back to staring at the stars above them. The night air feels cold on his whiskey-warmed skin, and he closes his eyes for a moment to feel the slight breeze on his face. Then he suddenly feels hands cupping his cheeks, the skin rough and grainy, and when Eliot opens his eyes, Roy's face floats before him, serious and intent. Roy leans in and they're lips meet briefly. Something electric uncoils through Eliot's body, like a live wire, dangerous and intense. He feels as if all the gaps and cracks in his being are stretching out to the horizon, filling up with light.

"Are you all right?" Roy asks, and Eliot realizes that he's shaking.

"Yes," Eliot says, so softly and quietly that the word evaporates before it can be heard. He nods instead and, before they kiss again, Roy brushes his thumb over Eliot's cheek and says, "Don't worry. We're friends. It's nothing to worry about, right?"

Eliot can't help but begin worrying, though. He already knows some of the things that will come to pass because of this. He will contemplate suicide, he will contemplate murder, he will hate himself for more reasons than usual—not just because he doesn't want to be away from his family, but because he has turned out to be the sort of boy who kisses other boys, and who wants a son like that? Everything seems like a dream right now, though, so sudden, and maybe it is a dream, nothing more than that. Eliot is prepared to continue sleepwalking.

He nods to answer again, his voice no longer functioning properly. Then Roy presses close again, his breath thick with whiskey and smoke. His body above Eliot blocks out the light from the stars.

9. Sad Alone

In the woods at night, the girl danced to the songs of frogs throating, crickets chirring, wind snaking through leaves, the gurgle of the nearby creek. A happy marriage these sounds made, so the girl danced, surrounded by fireflies and moths.

She could still see the fire through the spaces between the trees, her family's campsite near the cabin, so she was safe. She wasn't doing anything wrong—she was following the rules—so the moth-er shouldn't come running to pull her back to the fire to sit with her and the father. He was back again, but he didn't seem to be there. Not *really* there, that is. He didn't look at the girl during dinner, only stared into the fire before him, slouching. He didn't open his mouth for any bubbles to come out.

Now that it was night, the little old man was back again. This had become a regular event. In the early evening, after dinner, the little old man would leave, promising to be back before sunset at nine-thirty, or else he'd spend the night with his new friend. This time, though, the little old man had come back with his new friend riding along on a bike beside him, saying, "This is Roy. He'll be spending the night."

The girl missed the little old man when he was gone now, but she didn't dwell on this too much. The little old man no longer glowered at her, no longer gripped her hand too tight like the mother did, he no longer looked angry all the time, so she forgave his absence. He was happy, the girl realized, and in realizing the little old man's happiness and the distance between them that went along with it, she realized her own happiness as well. She didn't miss him enough to be sad about his absence, unlike the father, who made the mother sad when he was gone, who made everyone miss him in a way that made them want to cry or shout in his face.

This moth, the girl thought, stopping her dance for the moment. If she could find this moth, the moth that the father was looking for,

perhaps he would come back and be happy, and make the mother happy, and then everyone could be happy together, instead of sad alone. She smiled, proud of her idea, and turned to the fireflies and moths that surrounded her to ask the question.

"Can anyone help me?"

To which the insects all responded at once, their voices a chorus, asking, "What can we do? Are you all right? What? What?"

So the girl began to speak.

10. Each in their Own Place

Dr. Carroll is sitting by the campfire, staring at his two booted feet. Eliot's mother is saying, "This week it will happen. You can't get down on yourself. It's only been a month. You have the rest of the summer still. Don't worry."

Eliot's mother is cooking barbecued beans in a pot over the campfire. The flames lick at the bottom of the pan. Dr. Carroll shakes his head, looking distraught. There are new wrinkles in his forehead, and also around his mouth.

This has been a regular event over the past few weeks, Eliot's father returning briefly for supplies and rest, looking depressed and slightly damaged, growing older-looking before Eliot's eyes. Eliot feels bad for his father, but he'd also like to say, I told you so. That's just too mean, though, he's decided. The old Eliot would have said that, the new Eliot won't.

The new Eliot is a recent change he's been experiencing, and it's because of Roy. Roy's changed him somehow without trying, and probably without even wanting to make Eliot into someone new in the first place. Eliot supposes this is what happens when you meet a person with whom you can truly communicate. The new Eliot will always try to be nice and not so world-weary. He will not say mean things to his parents or sister. He will love them and think about their needs, because his no longer seem so bad off.

Roy says, "Is it always like this?" He and Eliot are sitting on the swing in the cabin's front porch. The swing's chains squeal above their heads as they rock. This is Roy's first visit to the place. Eliot's tried to keep him away from his family, because even though he's made the choice to be nice, he's still embarrassed by them a little. Also, he'd rather have Roy to himself.

That's another thing that's come between them. It happened a couple of weeks back. Roy and Eliot had been hanging out together, getting into minor trouble. They'd spray-painted their names on an overpass, egged Roy's neighbor's car, toilet-papered the high school. Roy attends, drank whiskey until they've puked. It's been a crazy summer, the best Eliot can remember really, and he doesn't want it to ever stop. Usually he goes to computer camp or just sits in front of the TV playing video games until school starts back up. Besides the vandalism and the drunken bouts, Eliot thinks he has fallen in love. Something like that. He and Roy have become like a couple, without using those words, without telling anyone else.

"My father's like Sisyphus," Eliot says, and Roy gives him this puzzled look.

"What did you say?"

"Sisyphus," Eliot repeats. "He was this guy from myth who was doomed by the gods to roll a rock up a mountain, but it keeps rolling back down when he gets to the top, so he has to roll it up again, over and over. Camus says it's the definition of the human condition, that myth. My mother teaches a class on it."

"Oh." Roy shakes his head. "Well, whatever."

That *whatever* is another thing that's come between them. Lately Roy says it whenever he doesn't understand Eliot, and doesn't care to try. It makes Eliot want to punch Roy right in the face. Eliot has taken to saying it as well, to see if it pisses off Roy as much, but whenever he says, "Whatever," Roy doesn't seem to give a damn. He just keeps on talking without noticing Eliot's attempts to make him angry.

The fireflies have come out for the evening, glowing on and off in the night mist. Crickets chirp, rubbing their legs together. An owl calls out its own name in the distance. Dawn is running between trees, her figure a silhouette briefly illuminated by the green glow of the fireflies, a shadow in the woods. Eliot still hasn't introduced her to Roy, and Roy hasn't asked why she acts so strangely, which makes Eliot think maybe he should explain before Roy says something mean about her, not understanding her condition. Dawn irritates Eliot, but he still doesn't want other people saying nasty things about her.

"She's autistic," Eliot says all of a sudden, pre-empting Roy's remarks. He pushes against the porch floorboards to make them swing faster, so Roy can't get off this ride too quick.

Roy doesn't seem shocked, though, or even interested in Dawn's erratic behavior. And why should he be? Eliot thinks. Roy himself has told Eliot much weirder things about his family. He told Eliot that first day, over an ice cream at the gas station, that he lived with his grandparents because his mother was an alcoholic, and his father was who-knows-where. That his mother would fight anyone in town, even Roy when she was drunk. That his grandfather was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, that he had found the white robes and the pointy hood in his grandfather's closet. That his grandmother used to sit him down at night before bed and read to him for a half an hour out of the Bible, and that afterwards she'd tell him he was born in sin, and should pray for forgiveness. It frightens Eliot a little, and makes him shiver, thinking of what it must be like to be Roy. He only hopes Roy's secret-sharing doesn't require an admission of his own private weirdnesses. He's not ready for that.

"Let's go inside," Roy says, putting his feet down flat on the porch. The swing suddenly comes to a halt. Roy stands and Eliot follows him into the cabin, already knowing what's going to happen. It's a vice of Roy's, fooling around in places where they might get caught.

We won't get caught here, Eliot thinks. His parents are outside by the heat of the fire, involved in their own problems. They won't bother to come inside the cabin now. Roy leads Eliot to the pink quilted cot and they lay down together, and begin to kiss.

Roy's lips are larger than Eliot's. Eliot feels like his lips aren't big enough. They're too thin and soft, like rose petals. Roy, he thinks, would probably like his lips bigger and rougher, chapped even. He can feel the cracks in Roy's lips, can taste Roy's cigarettes. Roy's stubble scratches Eliot's cheeks in this way that makes him crazy. Then Roy is pulling off Eliot's shirt, kissing Eliot's stomach, unbuttoning Eliot's shorts. Eliot closes his eyes. He mouths the words, *Someone is in love with me.* He is in the habit of mouthing sentences silently when he wants what he is saying to be true.

He feels his shorts being tugged down, then his breath catches in his throat, and he is off, off, off. Far away, his parents argue and his sister runs through the wilderness like a woodland creature, a nymph. Each of them in their private spaces, like the sections his mother made of the cabin when they first arrived. Each of them in their own place.

11. What the Firefly Said

"So," said the firefly, "you're looking for a moth." The girl nodded. "Yes," she said. "Actually, it's for my father. He's been searching for over a month." "And what does it look like?" the firefly said, floating in front of her face. "You know, a moth is a moth is a moth. But that's just my opinion."

"This one glows," she said. "An orangey-pink. It has brown and gold streaks on its back, and also it only comes out at night."

"Hmm," said the firefly. "I see. Wait here a moment."

The firefly flew off. The girl watched it for a while, then lost it among the other greenish blips. She sighed, sat down on the ground beneath a pine tree, picking up a few needles covered in sticky sap.

"I'm back," said the firefly, and the girl looked up. It had brought a friend, and they both landed on her lap.

"I know who you're looking for," the other firefly said.

The girl felt a rush of excitement churl in her stomach. Her face flushed with heat. "Really?" she said. "Oh, please, you must help me

find it."

"This moth, though," the firefly said, "it's a bit of a loner. There are a few of them I know of, but they don't even talk amongst themselves. I don't understand them. You know, we fireflies, we like to have a good time. We like to party." It chuckled softly and nudged its friend.

"I'll do anything," the girl said. "Please, if only it would make my father happier. He looks paler and thinner each time he comes back."

"Well," the firefly said. "Let me see what I can make happen. I have a lot of connections. We'll see what turns up."

"Thank you," said the girl. "Oh, thank you, thank you."

The fireflies both floated off. She sat under the tree for a while longer, thinking everything would be good now. Her whole family would be happy for once.

Then the mother and the father were calling her name, loud, over and over. She saw them coming towards her, running. The mother pulled her up from the ground and said, "I was so worried, so worried." The father grunted and led them back to the cabin, where the little old man and his new friend were sitting by the campfire.

understand some of the things that comes out of his mother's mouth, he's been around her long enough to pretend like he knows what he's talking about; he knows enough catch-phrases to get by. Whatever works, he's thinking, to make that jerk go away or feel sorry.

Eliot notices that everything is strangely quiet, both inside the cabin and out. He sits up in bed and looks out the window. The campfire is a pile of ashes, still glowing orange and red from last night. His mother is nowhere to be seen, and both Roy and Dawn aren't around either. His father, he thinks, is who-knows-where.

Eliot goes outside and looks around back of the cabin.

Nothing but weeds and a few scrub bushes and saplings grow here.

He walks to the edge of the woods, to where the trails begin, and starts to worry. Dawn. He hasn't been in a state of mind to watch her, and his mother has proved ineffectual at the task. He mouths the words, *my sister is safe and around that tree there, playing with a caterpillar* and then he goes to check.

Dawn's not behind the tree, and there are no caterpillars in sight. Eliot suddenly clenches his teeth. He hears, somewhere close by,

The creek holds the image of the world on its surface, the trees and clouds and a sun pinned like a jewel on its narrow, rippled neck.

"I can't do this anymore," said the mother. "I can't keep her in one place. She's always wandering off."

"Just a little longer," said the father. "I can't go back without it. I've been teaching the same classes to an endless stream of students. I can't go back without this."

The mother nodded and rubbed her temples. "I know," she said. "I know."

Then the little old man told his friend, "This is my sister. Her name is Dawn. She doesn't talk much."

The little old man's friend stared at her for a moment. His eyes grew wide; he smiled at her. The little old man's friend said, "Your sister's beautiful," as if he couldn't believe it himself.

12. Your Sister's Beautiful

Your sister's beautiful
Your sister's beautiful
Your sister's beautiful

Lying on his cot, staring at the bare rafters of the cabin, imagining Roy hanging by his neck from one of the rafters, his face blue in death, Eliot cannot force Roy's words out of his mind. He's been hearing them over and over since Roy—stupid idiotic trashy no-good thoughtless bastard—said them three nights ago.

Your sister's beautiful

And me? Eliot thinks. What about me? Why couldn't Roy have said the same thing about Eliot, with whom he's much more involved and supposedly loves enough to take to bed? Eliot is thinking, I should kill him. I should be like one of those people on talk shows, or in novels. I should commit a crime of passion that anyone could understand.

Outside somewhere, Roy is hanging out with Dawn. He's been with Eliot for over a month and never once cared to come up to the cabin until Eliot brought him himself. Now he's come up everyday since that first night, and Eliot has been ignoring him defiantly, walking away when Roy starts to speak, finding opportunities to make Roy feel stupid, talking to his mother about high-minded philosophical things in front of Roy. Even if Eliot himself doesn't

Roy's voice. He can't make out what Roy is saying, but he's talking to someone in that voice of his—the idiotic stupid no-good trashy bastard voice.

Eliot walks in the direction of the voice. He follows a trail until it narrows and dips down into a ravine. There's the creek where he and Dawn watched crayfish for hours. The way water moves, the way it sparkles under light, and reflects the things around it, the trees, and Eliot's and Dawn's own faces, can entrance Dawn for hours. The creek holds the image of the world on its surface, the trees and clouds and a sun pinned like a jewel on its narrow, rippled neck. Beneath the creek, under the water, is another world, full of crayfish and snakes and fish no bigger than fingers. Eliot wonders if his mother has included something philosophical about the creek in her feminist revision of *Walden*. He wonders if she's noticed the same things that he notices.

Roy's voice fades, then reappears, like a trick or a prank, and soon Eliot sees him sitting under a tree with Dawn. Roy's talking to her real sweet. Eliot recognizes that voice. He's playing with Dawn's hand, which she keeps pulling away from him. Roy doesn't know Dawn hates to be touched. The only thing she can stand is a tight embrace, and then she won't ever let go. It's a symptom, her doctor has told the family, of her autism.

Now Roy is leaning into Dawn, trying to kiss her, and Dawn pulls her head back. She stands up and starts walking towards the creek. Eliot feels his hands clench, becoming fists. Roy stands up and follows Dawn. He walks in front of her and she squeals in his face. A high-pitched banshee squeal. The squeal, Eliot thinks, of death.

Eliot finds he is running towards them, his fists ready to pummel Roy. He wonders if he can actually do it, he hasn't ever used them before, not like this. Can I do it, he wonders, as Roy turns with a surprised expression on his face.

Yes, he can.

His first punch lands on Roy's cheekbone, right under Roy's eye. The second one glances blandly off of Roy's stomach, making Roy double up and expel a gasp of breath. Then Eliot is screaming at the top of his lungs, "Get out! Get the hell out! Get the hell out!"

His voice turns hoarser each time he screams, but he keeps screaming anyway. Roy looks up at Eliot with a red mark on his face. It's already darkening into a bruise that Eliot wishes he could take a picture of and frame. He'd like to hang it on his wall and keep it forever. A reminder of his ignorance.

Roy says, "Whatever. Fucking faggot," and starts to walk away, back up the trail. When he reaches the top of the ravine and walks over it, he disappears from Eliot's sight, and from Eliot's life, forever.

Eliot is breathing heavily, ready to hit Roy again. He's a little surprised at how easy it was, that he has a space inside him that harbors violence. At the same time, he's impressed with himself. He's not sure if he should feel afraid or proud of his actions. He's not sure if he has room for both.

next evening, and that they could bring the moth to her there. "Won't my father be surprised!" she told the fireflies, and they both shrugged, saying, "It's just a moth, I mean really! What's so special about that?"

You have no idea, she wanted to tell them. But she simply told them thank you, and crept back into the cabin to sleep.

14. Why Now?

When Dr. Carroll returned from his latest outing, he looked ready to fold up and die on the spot. Eliot and Dawn hung back in the shadows of the porch, swinging a little, while their mother sat at the campfire with their father and tried her best to comfort him. There was still no moth, he told her, and he was ready to face

She told the fireflies she would be waiting by the campfire the next evening, and that they could bring the moth to her there.

Dawn stands beside him, looking into his face. She's quiet and still for once in her life. She smoothes down the wrinkles in her shorts with the flats of her hands, over and over. He's most likely disturbed her. Or Roy has. Or both of them did. Eliot says, "Come on, let's go back." He doesn't yell at her or yank her wrist. And Dawn follows him up the trail, out of the ravine, back to the cabin.

13. The Assignation

Something woke her late in the night. *Tap, tap, tap.* Something kept tapping, and so she sat up in bed and looked around her. The mother and father were asleep on their cots, the little old man slept on the other side of the sheet separating them. None of them were tapping.

Then she heard it again, and looked over her shoulder. In the window square, two fireflies hovered, blinking out a message. *Outside. Five minutes.*

The girl quietly got out of her cot and stepped into her sandals. She pulled a piece of hair out of her mouth. Peaking around the corner of the sheet, she watched the little old man for a while, his chest rising and falling in steady rhythms of sleep. Earlier that evening, she and the little old man had sat in their respective corners, on their respective cots, and by the light of a lantern, they had made shadow creatures appear on the sheet separating their rooms. Bats and butterflies, and even a dog's head that could open its mouth and bark. She loved the little old man, and wished she could tell him as much.

Then she tiptoed out of the cabin, closing the door behind her carefully. The two fireflies were waiting for her by the smoldering campfire.

"What's the matter?" the girl asked. "Has something happened?"

The fireflies nodded together. One of them said, "We've found your moth. The one you asked about. Orangey-pink glow, gold and brown streaks on its wings? We found him."

"Oh, thank you so much," she told them. "How can I repay you?"

"Wait," the fireflies both said. "He isn't here with us. You'll have to wait. He was busy. A real snob, if you want our opinions. But he said he would drop by tomorrow evening. He asked why you wanted to meet him. We said you were a new fixture here, and wanted to meet all the neighbors."

"That's wonderful," the girl said, liking the idea of her being a fixture here, of being a part of the natural surroundings.

She told the fireflies she would be waiting by the campfire the up to the possibility that this summer has been a total waste, that his memory of something unique that no one else had ever discovered was probably false.

Eliot decided to make himself and Dawn scarce, so he took her inside the cabin and, lighting a lantern, entertained her with hand shadows thrown against the sheet separating their cots. They fell asleep after a while, and when Eliot wakes the next morning, he finds his mother and father already outside, cooking breakfast over the fire.

"We're going to leave tomorrow," Eliot's father tells him, whisking eggs in a stainless steel bowl.

"Good," says Eliot, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. He yawns, and takes a glass of orange juice his mother offers him. She's been to town already, and has brought back some fresh food and drinks from Mac's. He takes a sip of the orange juice and holds it in his mouth for a moment, savoring the taste.

"Well, I for one have got a lot of work to do when we get back," Eliot's mother says. "A whole summer spent camping, and I haven't prepared anything for my fall classes yet."

Eliot looks at Dawn, who sits on a log on the other side of the fire, eating sausage links with her fingers. He smiles at her, and gives her a wink. Dawn, to his surprise, smiles and winks back.

The day passes with all of them making preparations to leave the next day. They pack the wagon full of their clothes and camping equipment, and then retire at dusk to the fire, where their faces flush yellow and orange from the flames. All four of them stare at each other, or stare at the last pot of beans cooking on the fire. They're tired, all of them. Puffy gray sacs of flesh hang under their eyes. They are a family, Eliot thinks, of zombies. The walking dead. Faces gray, eyes distant, mouths closed. No one speaks.

Soon after they're finished eating, Dawn gets up from her seat and wanders away from the fire. But not so far that her mother and father can't see where she has gone. Finally, when the fireflies have come to life, filling the night air with an apple green glow, Eliot spots it, his father's moth, pinwheeling through the air around Dawn, surrounded by an orangey pink halo.

"Dad," he says, "Dad, look." And Dr. Carroll turns to see where Eliot is pointing. A strange little noise comes out of his mouth. Almost a squeak. He heaves himself off the log he's crouched on, and stumbles towards Dawn and the moth.

There it is, thinks Eliot. Why now? Why has it decided to make an appearance after all this time, after all this pain? Why now? he wonders, wanting answers that perhaps don't exist. He suspects

Dawn has something to do with it, the same way Dawn made the grasshoppers line up together and do synchronized leaps

Dr. Carroll shouts, "Keep an eye on it, don't let it get away!" and he rushes to the car to dig through the back for a net or a box. He comes jogging back with a clear plastic box that has a screen fitted into the lid and vents on the sides. A few twigs and leafs wat inside of it. He opens the lid, scoops up the moth, and snaps the box shut

But then Dawn is squealing. She runs over to her father and tries to pry the box out of his hands. What is she doing? Eliot can't understand why she'd do a thing like that. She's beating at her father's chest, saying—what?—saying, "No! No! No! You can't lock it up like that!"

What? Eliot's thinking. He's thinking. What's happening here?

His mother steps between Dawn and Dr. Carroll, grabbing Dawn around her shoulders to pull her in for a hug. Dawn is sobbing now, her shoulders heaving, and she leans into her mother for the hug, and doesn't let go for fifteen minutes at least. Eliot stays by the fire, afraid of what's going on in front of him. He doesn't know what to do or say

Dr. Carroll says, "What's wrong with her? I can't believe she tried to do that."

Eliot's mother says, "Leave her alone. Just leave her alone, why don't you? Can't you see she's upset?"

Dr. Carroll walks away from them, holding his box with the moth inside it close to his chest. It glows still. The box lights up like a faery lantern. The smile on his father's face tells Eliot exactly what he is holding. This box, says Eliot's father's smile, contains my youth

15. The Message

It is late now, so late that Eliot has fallen asleep for several hours and then, inexplicably, woke in the night. He doesn't have to pee, and he doesn't feel too hot, or sick. But something is wrong, and it makes him sit up and look around the cabin. His parents are asleep on their cots. The cabin is quiet except for their breathing. He gets out of bed, and once again, the coils of the cot squeal as he removes his weight from them. He pulls back a corner of the sheet separating his room from Dawn's and finds that she is not in her bed. She's not in the cabin at all

Eliot runs out of the cabin in his bare feet. The grass is dewy, wetting his feet. He doesn't look behind the cabin, or by the fire, or in the nearby field. He runs down the trail to the ravine where he hit Roy, and finds Dawn there, standing by the creek. Mist and fog hover over the water. Dawn stands in the mist surrounded by a swarm of fireflies. She looks like a human Christmas tree with all of those lights blinking around her. She looks like a magic creature. Like a woodland spirit. Eliot thinks.

"Dawn," he says when he reaches her. But Dawn holds out her hand and raises one of her fingers. Wait, she is asking. One moment. Wait

Eliot stands before her, and suddenly the fireflies drop from the air as if they have all had sudden heart attacks, their lights extinguished. They lay at his feet, crawling around in the grasses. Then, all at the same time, their lights flicker on again, and Eliot finds they have arranged themselves into letters. Spelled out in the grass, glowing green, are the words *Love You, Eliot.*

Eliot looks up to find Dawn's face shining with tears, and he feels his own eyes filling. He steps around the fireflies and hugs Dawn, and whispers that he loves her, too. They stay there for a while, hugging, until Eliot takes Dawn's hand and leads her back to the cabin before their parents wake up

16. Now

When the Carroll's return home from Pennsylvania, they do their best to return to their lives as they once knew them. Eliot's father, uncanny specimen in hand, sets to work on his new research. His mother resumes classes in the Fall and publishes an essay called "Woman, Nature, Words" in a feminist philosophy journal

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, Dawn attends school—she has learned how to say "My name is Dawn Carroll. I am seventeen years old, thank you, you're welcome, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye." Goodbye is her favorite new word. She sometimes shouts it at the top of her lungs, and goodbye floats up to the vaulted ceilings at home, spinning this direction and that, searching for an escape route, a way out of the confines of walls and floors and ceilings. Eventually it bursts, and bits of goodbye, wet and soapy, fall back down onto her face.

Eliot returns to school as well, to high school, where he learns to slouch and to not look up from his feet, and how to evade talking to other people as much as possible. He begins to dress in black clothes and to listen to depressing music—"Is that what they mean by Gothic?" his mother asks him—but he doesn't dignify her question with an answer. His grades flag and falter. "Needs to work harder," his teachers report. Mr. and Mrs. Carroll send him to a psychologist, a Dr. Emery, who sits behind her desk and doesn't say much of anything. She waits in the long silences for Eliot to begin speaking, and once he starts talking, it's difficult to stop

Eliot tells her everything that happened over the summer, and Dr Emery nods a lot and continues to offer little in the way of conversation. Dr. Emery advises Eliot to tell his parents whatever he feels he needs to, and that she will try to help them understand. But Eliot isn't ready, not yet at least, and now that he's told someone else what happened, he wants to think about other things for a while. Video games, music, television, even his schoolwork. Things that are comforting and easy. For now it's enough to have Dr. Emery to talk to, someone safe and understanding. For now.

This is the first in a series of people that Eliot finds he can actually talk to. The others will come to him, friends and lovers, scattered throughout the rest of his life. In a few years he won't even be thinking that no one can understand him. He will be leaning back on his pillows and staring at the neon plastic stars he's pasted to his ceiling, in his own apartment a few blocks from where he attends college, and he will be thinking about that night in the ravine, by the creek. He'll remember Dawn lit up by fireflies, and how they arranged themselves into glowing green letters, like the constellation of glowing stars above him, like the stars he watched through the roof of the rusted out corvette with Roy. He'll think about his sister and how she learned to speak the language of moths, the language of fireflies and crickets. How he had learned the language of love and betrayal, the language of self-hate and mistrust. How much more his sister knew, he realizes later, than he ever did.

When he thinks about Dawn's message, Eliot will be in love with someone who loves him back. This boy that he'll love will be asleep beside him while Eliot stays awake, staring at the stars above, thinking about Dawn's message

Love You, Eliot, she had instructed the fireflies to spell out

At the time, Eliot had interpreted Dawn's message to mean she loved him, and of course there's that, too. But when he thinks about it now, in the future, he's not so sure. The "I" of her message was mysteriously missing, but its absence might only have been an informal gesture on Dawn's part. He wonders now if Dawn was saying something entirely different that night. Has he misunderstood her message, or only understood half of it? Meaning is always lost, at least partially, in translation, he thinks

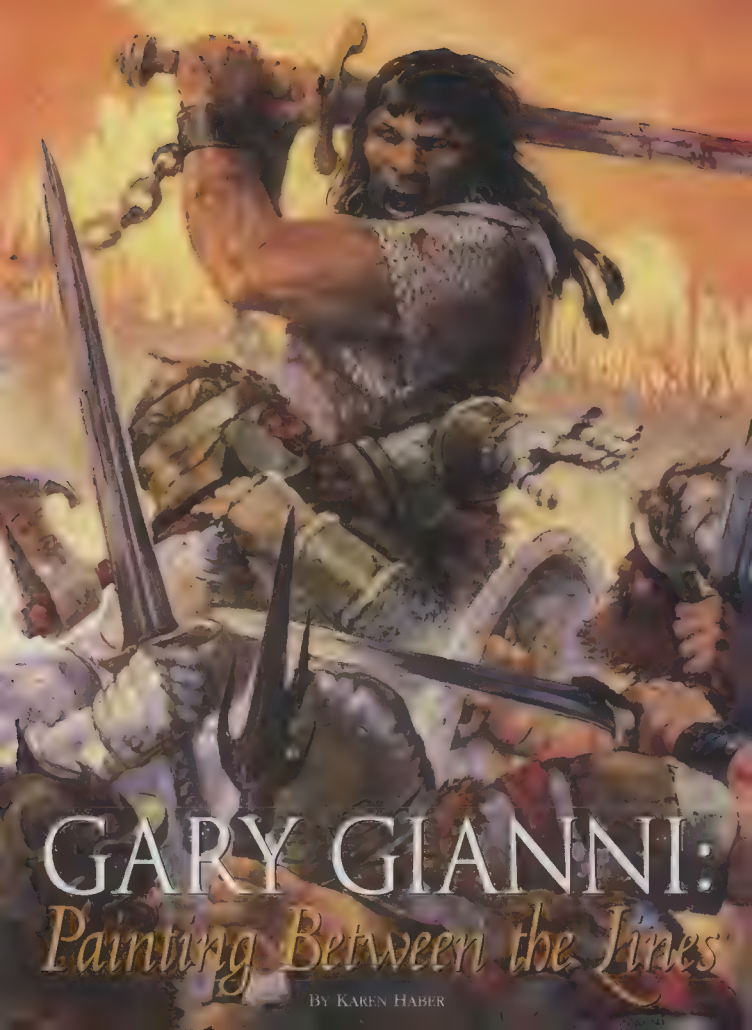
Love You, Eliot, she had told him, the letters glowing like green embers in the grass.

Now, in the future, this future that he imagined so many years ago, the future in which he lived in his own apartment, with his own television and his own books, the future in which he goes to college and finds himself not as wrong or as weird as he once thought he was, in this future he wonders if Dawn was also giving him a piece of advice.

Love You, Eliot, she had told him.

And he does that. He knows how to do that

Now. ❧



GARY GIANNI:
Painting Between the Lines

By Karen Haber

LEFT: *The cover art for* Conan of Cimmeria.

BELOW: *An alliance between Conan and the bandit leader Gheerd begins to unravel in* A Witch Shall Be Born.

[illegible] work [illegible] art [illegible] and realism [illegible] art of literature," says award-winning illustrator Gary Gianni. "He has a responsibility to remain faithful to the author's intent. Book illustration is a unique combination of artwork hanging on words. You always aware that literature rises above the imagery. It's the responsibility of the artist not to picture or interfere with the relationship between [illegible] service the story [illegible]."

Gianni has a particular, perhaps unique, flair for heroic image-making. His evocative painterly visuals and fine linework depicting Robert E. Howard's Conan, Solomon Kane, and Bran Mak Morn, and comic heroes such as *Prince Valiant* and *Indiana Jones*, has brought him critical praise and viewer recognition. Gianni is rapidly becoming the go-to guy when [illegible]

Prince Valiant
BY GIANNI AND SCHULTZ
Our story
A YOUNG FOR A LITTLE SOUND
STUDY? WELL IS ABOUT TO GO ON
HOLIDAY AS A KNIGHT ERRANT, AND NATHAN IS TO
ACCOMPANY HIM AS SQUIRE. THE PREPARATIONS
CANNOT GO QUICKLY ENOUGH FOR VAL!
ALTHOUGH A NECESSARY BREAK FROM TRAINING, ALL ARE
SADDENED BY THE SHAMING NEWS. MESSENGERS HAVE
TOURNEYED FAR AND WIDE TO THE SINGLEMORE WORLD
OF THE WARWICK REALMS BACK TEARS.

MEANWHILE, NOT FAR AWAY, ACCEPTED
THAT THERE SOON HAS SURPRISED SOME
LATE-NIGHTS INTERNATIONAL ARTICLES
WITH HIS SWADDLING.
"NOW THEY ARE FRIENDSHIP, THROUGH THE
MEDIUM GATE AND THE INTEGRITY OF REGAL
RESPONSIBILITY GIFTS FROM WHICH SWEDLEDOM
ANTHEM CANNOT SURPRISES A CORK AS HIS
FATHER LETS LOOSE A YELP OF PAIN! GLEE.
NEXT WEEK: The Call

ABOVE: *The syndicated newspaper adventure strip* Prince Valiant *is drawn by Gianni and written by Mark Schultz* ***BELOW:*** *Conan and Zenobia share a tender moment in* Hour of the Dragon

"I've been asked to depict a lot of heroic, fictional characters. Characters that, to me, conjure up romance and even more–maybe some thought-provoking ideas–not just action for action's sake." I wasn't consciously seeking this out. But now that I look back at my career I'm beginning to see that, even with *Indiana Jones* comics and with *Prince Valiant*, certainly, I seem to have a feeling for heroic visions." Gianni embarked upon his relationship with mythic heroes and art in high school when he first spotted Frank Frazetta's seminal cover paintings of Robert E. Howard's barbarian hero, Conan. After graduation from The Chicago Academy of Fine Art in 1976 he got a job as an illustrator for the *Chicago Tribune*, and then worked as a courtroom sketch artist for network television news.

"That job was overwhelming in terms of pressure, deadlines, and the need for close observation and quick response," he recalls. "It was good training for gesture drawing and figure work in general, and there was portraiture involved in it. I think that's where I began to realize I preferred mood over visual detail."

Gianni learned his lessons well: he's a master of suggesting rather than stating, of allowing body language to make its case for a character, and of selecting the telling detail rather than blinding the viewer with visual overkill. "You can convey the emotion without being concerned about details. That's certainly my approach of choice."

Part of that approach has to do with his profound respect for the word, the story, and the writer's connection with the reader.

"Especially with the work of Robert E. Howard, I hope to enhance the reader's experience without being too literal. In his work, Howard will often have some unseen lightening thing that creates enormous tension and apprehension. But he doesn't describe it in detail. He lets his reader's imagination fill in the local color."

Gianni's ability to see between the lines enables him to recognize useful, telling details and characters that might sail past a less experienced artist.

"There's a scene in 'Wings of the Night' where Howard has villagers out in the fields. These people are basically fodder for the end of the story, and I wanted to bring some sense of humanity to them.

"One way I did this–and it's one of my favorite illustrations–was by painting a baby suckling at the breast of a mother while nearby another woman harvests crops. I know that an illustration like that isn't the kind of thing you normally associate with Howard, but at the end of the book, harpies destroy the whole village, and carry away people. I wanted to show the human side, the human cost. An image that we can relate to on a basic emotional level. I reach into the wings, offstage to find visual implications. I think it's poignant–and important–to play up the human side of these tales. And it invites the viewer to participate."

"Some of the most effective illustration can be decorative, not literal. For a scene in which pirates were plotting mayhem in a cellar, I drew a picture of a tankard on its side with a skull and crossbones spilling out of the liquor."

Emotional content and integrity is the key with which Gianni unlocks his creative vault. "I think in terms of emotion. Maybe I'm imposing my viewpoint a bit. For example, in one illustration for Conan, I didn't want to put a slave girl in a provocative pose. The situation just didn't call for it. A friend of mine said, "Well, you've just ruined the resale value of that' painting." But that's not how I saw it. I guess I just felt the girl needed to be shown in a sympathetic light, rather than a sex object. Even if she's dealing with Conan the Barbarian."

He's recently finished Volume 2 of Wandering Star's Conan series, requiring production of eight paintings and 95 illustrations. His sketchbook of work and commentary, *Robert E. Howard's Conan of Cimmeria*" should be required reading for any aspiring illustrators interested in developing their hand skills.

All told, Gianni has spent six years working on Robert E. Howard's oeuvre. "Conan has proved an interesting challenge

ABOVE: *Gianni's portrait of Kane reveals the grim nature of Howard's sixteenth century adventurer* ***BELOW:*** *Gianni's art graces the cover for* The Shadow *in "Hell's Headwaye" from Dark Horse Comics*

There's a temptation to rely on stereotypical pose and certain devices—and I really tried to avoid that. Especially with Conan-he's got a lot of visual baggage attached to him. It's difficult to find new ways of portraying him. With Conan you have to strike the balance between conventional imagery and yet try and find something a little more personal and still convey a sense of power and pent up hostility.

"I don't have a physical affinity with Conan–I'm not a big, hulking, confrontational type, and so I had to go outside of myself for him. It was an interesting creative challenge."

The result of that challenge is a triumphant vision of the famous barbarian, a full-color, slip-case cover painting in which Conan sits with golden goblet clutched in his massive hand, his eyes narrowed by impatience as he watches his unreliable companion pour another round. The danger and power of the Barbarian is made palpable through body language. Gianni's loose brushwork and softened colors evoke a magical world in this image, in which heroes and villains find shelter within silken tents amidst golden treasure while their restive minions bake outside in the desert sun.

Despite his painterly tendencies, Gianni wanted to illustrate comic books. "I loved comics when I was a kid. I wanted to be a comic book artist, and it took me a while to get there. Really good comic work is a blend of picture and word. Some of the storytelling has to be done by word, and some by picture."

Painted illustration and comic art is like the difference between classical music and jazz. Although you're using the same notes there's a different sensibility. I know a lot of wonderful illustrators who can't make the transition to comics, and vice versa."

Obviously, Gianni hasn't had a problem moving back and forth between painting and line work. At Dark Horse Comics he wrote and drew "Indiana Jones and The Shrine of the Sea Devil," collaborated with such major writers as Harlan Ellison and Andrew Vachss, and teamed up with Michael Kaluta to work on The Shadow. He also created "The Monstermen Mysteries," a feature in Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*. Collaborating with Archie Goodwin in 1997, his illustrations won him The Eisner Award for Best Short Story, "Heroes," in *Batman: Black and White* for DC Comics.

Currently Gianni draws the last great adventure strip still appearing in newspapers (and now on-line) *Prince Valiant*. Before taking the strip over completely, Gianni assisted artist John Cullen Murphey. Murphy contacted him to ask for his assistance. "He said he saw an illustration approach that he liked in my stuff and so he contacted me. I was really honored. It was a pleasure to talk with him and hear about his experiences with Norman Rockwell and other illustrators. He's a direct line back to the Golden Age of illustrators and his dedication to his craft inspired a lot of artists." John Cullen Murphy died in July of 2004.

Hand skills loom large in Gianni's notion of what's important in art-making. "I'm an old fashioned guy and I enjoy the challenge of hand-to-paper combat. When I make a wrong line, it's an organic thing and I integrate it into the pen-drawing. Sometimes those things go in directions that I don't anticipate, and the result can be something better than I originally aimed for."

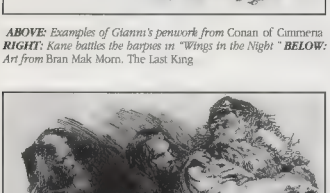
"The more I can push the human hand in the work, the more painterly it becomes, the happier I am. That's why I prefer artists like Wyeth, Rembrandt, and J. C. Coll. There's a visceral physicality in their work that I love."

"Hand skills are going to be the last refuge for illustrators where we can have some sort of position and personality. I know that this is a controversial subject, and an argument can be made either way, pro and con, about digital work. I know some artists who do wonderful digital work, but it's not for me."

Gianni spent six years working on the pen drawings and oil paintings to illustrate lavish special limited editions of Robert E. Howard's *Savage Tales of Solomon Kane*, *Bran Mak Morn*, and *Conan Volume II*, published by Wandering Star Press in 1998.

Ballantine Books' Del Rey division has now issued trade editions of these books. "I'm excited about it," Gianni says. "I hope they will

ABOVE: *Examples of Gianni's penwork from* Conan of Cimmeria
RIGHT: *Kane battles the harpies in "Wings in the Night"* ***BELOW:*** *Art from* Bran Mak Morn: The Last King



reach a few more readers. The limited edition by Wandering Star made an impact but you can't reach a wide audience that way."

"It's a different mind set between doing a painting and sketching. I always find it fascinating to look at artist's preliminary doodles. Perhaps that's why I'm so pleased with the Wandering Star book of my sketches. *Robert E Howard's Conan of Cimmeria: Drawing and Sketches by Gary Gianni* (Wandering Star Publishers) It really gives readers an inside view of the creative process."

"It's easy to see why so many artists have been fascinated with the Conan stories," Gianni says. "It's a grand opportunity to unleash the imagination, designing cities and weapons, costumes and monsters. The canvas is so vast, I don't believe any one artist will be able to capture the complete scope with all of its aspects."

Gianni is deeply aware of his debt to the artists who have come before him: Wyeth, Pyle, Coll, Krenkel, and Kirby, to name a few. He's also aware, perhaps painfully so, of the difficulty of establishing a distinctive, non-derivative style.

"I find it's more difficult to be creative today because of the homogenization of visuals. Everything's starting to look the same and anything that is successful is easily copied because we have this great technology at hand to do it. We have more images flashed at us now and we're able to instantly reference an African hillside, or even a dragon for that matter, more so than an illustrator did in 1905. People may have had more of an imagination then because the reference wasn't so readily available. They had to create these scenes in their own head."

"It requires a bit of shutting down . because its all prejudiced by what we've seen in other's artists' work today. This is a bit of a contradictory statement coming from an artist, but you have to stop looking at things around you and again rely on an inner sensibility to come up with anything that might be unique."

"I was in a bookstore the other day and there was a version of *Treasure Island* or *Kidnapped* and the characters in the book looked like models in costumes. That's a fault I see in a lot of illustration."

"I didn't want a character like Solomon Kane to look like any one in particular, especially some dashing Erroll Flynn character. That's obviously not what Howard had in mind. Kane is mysterious, iconographic. Howard doesn't allow a reader to get 'inside' of a character. He tends to keep his audience at arm's length. The best I could do was get 'beside' Kane, and maybe walk along with him a bit. He's somebody I only know from a distance."

From inside or outside, reinterpreting classic adventure heroes for an entirely new generation is a task for which Gianni is uniquely suited, and one that he obviously relishes. He's respectful of the tradition in which he works, and the artistic legacy to which he hopes to contribute. "All artists hope their work will stand the test of time. I would like to think viewers will find some emotional energy running through my art work. I put a lot of feeling into my work. I hope it shows."

Note: Readers interested in finding Gary Gianni's work on the Web can find him at www.comicbookpros.com/gianni/

Blackthorn and Nettles

Hate and love can be intertwined just as lovers intertwine themselves. As with lovers, this conjoining can produce quite physical results.

By Liz Williams
Illustration by Eric Deschamps

I HAVE THROWN THE LITTLE DARK THING OVER THE lip of the cauldron and now I stand and watch as it falls, twisting through thickets of starlight, past pools of moons, spiraling down. The cauldron's rim is cold bronze beneath my hands, sticky as ice. Arian once told me, with that *I-know-something-that-you-do-not, Creirwy* tilt of her head, that it was cold between the stars, but I do not know why she should think such a thing.

At last the little dark thing has fallen so fast and so far that I can't see it any longer. I peel my hands away from the cauldron and go to the window to push the hanging aside. Now, toward the end of the year, it is frosty first thing in the morning. The snow has begun to glide back down the slopes of Yr Wyddfa and the woods around Nantlleu lake are a haze of fading gold. There are blackberry spirals growing around the foot of the fort and the world seems too fair for me to feel such hate, but it rises up in me like boiling sap, welling out in tears as though drawn up by the failing sun.

But this is the last time I will ever look out of this window. Once twilight has fallen, I will slip out into the frosty dark and head for the coast and my father's lands. I do not think anyone will see me go. There is to be no feast tonight: the fortress hums like a hive, aghast—all except me. For I am filled with hate and rejoicing, so bitter and sweet that I can taste it on my tongue like new wine.

A year ago, I foresaw none of this. I knew nothing of the land of Gwynedd, nor of Math and his shaman nephews, save that which I had heard in stories. But stories are always growing and changing, acquiring more and more stitches with each telling until you can no longer see the weave beneath. When my father sent me north, I did not know what to expect, only that it was a great honor to serve as the foot-holder of Math, and a great danger, too. I was to be the World Maiden, who anchors the lord to the land and saves him from the veil of Annwn. That is, my father spoke of it as an honor, but I had heard the whispers of what had happened to Math's last foot-holder at the hands of his nephew Gilfaethwy.

"You need not worry," my father told me. "The rapist has been sent away now, raiding to the west across the sea. You will not have to see him. Math had them punished—the rapist and his brother Gwydion both."

But I was to learn that punishment and Gwydion did not last, it ran from him like rain, leaving only a faint bitter residue behind, and little learning. Given the fate of the previous foot-holder, I resolved to be wary of Gwydion, to keep my guard up. I pictured a dour, brutal man, like so many of these northern lords, but he was also a shaman and I did not understand, then, that Gwydion could slide around one's guard as subtly as sunlight, so softly that one did not even realize that one had invited the dark bird in, until it was far too late.

Before I left for the north, I went to the woods and sought out the oak-wife of our tribe. She had trained me, since the day my courses came, and I had learned much. Surely, I thought, no northern magic-man was a match for our oak-wife.

I found her in a sacred task, cutting the mistletoe that gathers in the branches while the snow fell around her like owl-feathers. Neither of us spoke. I watched her, and she gave no sign that she had seen me, but I was certain that she knew I was there. When she had finished and climbed down the tree, she gestured with a nod and I followed her small limping figure through the cold to her cave. There, underneath the twist of ice that would soon thaw to become a waterfall, she spoke at last.

"Remember what I have told you about your *nemeton*, your shadow-shield? How it lies around you, unseen, protective, an armor of air?"

I closed my eyes and felt the *nemeton* draw up around me, an invisible snail shell, woven from the spirit of snow and the iron-hard ground. I felt it encase me, just as leather armor encases a warrior.

"Good," the oak-wife said. "Use what is around you for your own protection. Use the land—the woods and sea and sky, thorn and bramble and briar. Weave yourself into the web of the world, until you are part of its warp and its weft, and no one can work ill upon you without tearing the world apart. Now go, and remember what I have told you."

I remembered, and at winter's end I was sent north.

I had been at Math's fortress, that stone tower on the shores of Nantlleu lake, for almost a month before Gwydion returned. When his presence was announced at the feast that night, the air in the chamber seemed to crackle and hiss like the air before a storm. I sat with Math's feet in my lap and stared straight ahead.

Gwydion was smaller than I had imagined, but then legends often are. He was not the hulking warrior that men consider impressive, but a slight man with a quick dark gaze. When he stepped into the torchlight, I saw that his hair had a red gleam to it, like the coat of a stoat or a fox. But later I learned that his totem was the crow, and he made no secret of it; he had taken on the aspect of the bird, the shadows that it cast. And something in those shadows spoke to me. I could feel his gaze upon me as I sat with Math's feet in my woollen lap, and it drew me as a lure draws a hunting hawk. I do not know what he saw when he looked at me. I thought, perhaps, that he smiled. Math's voice, and those of the other men, retreated to a sound like the distant sea. I forgot the *nemeton* around me, but the walls of the fort seemed as insubstantial. I heard nothing except Gwydion's murmuring voice. And when I was once more alone in my own little chamber, I cursed myself for a fool of the world.

That night, with the crescent moon rising over Yr Wyddfa's white shoulder, there was a soft knock at my door. I thought I might be imagining the sound, and I was also afraid. I did not open the door. The next day, he came to find me as I worked among the herbs. I crouched with my fingers buried in the soft earth and would not look at him, and kept my voice cold when I replied to his greeting. I felt, rather than saw, him crouch down beside me.

"Look at me," he said, and against my will I looked up into crow-black eyes. "That's better. You are Creirwy, are you not? Daughter of Gwilym of the red-earth country? May I call you Cre?"

"If you wish, my lord."

"Oh," he said. "You do not have to call me that."

His gaze was half-mockery, half challenge. I could see little in it of desire. He wore a thong around his neck with a bone hanging from it, pale against paler skin, and at first I thought it was the bone of a bird. But then he moved, shifting position a little, and the bone changed, broadening and flattening like a human finger. My eyes must have widened. At last I remembered my *nemeton* and drew it up around me, out of the sun-warmed earth and the nearby briars.

"I have to go inside," I told him, and rising, I left him there among the herbs.

That night, I woke and Gwydion was standing by my pallet. I felt his shadow over me, soft as feathers.

"How did you—"

"Hush," he said. The bone around his throat seemed to glow with its own light.

"Lord," I said, shaking. "You understand that—"

"The foot-holder must be a virgin. Yes, I know." Once more, he crouched down beside me. His voice was still light, still mocking. "After last time, how could I not know? Do you know what my uncle Math did to my brother and I?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on, "He ran us through the changes of the world. Hare and hound, stag and doe. He made us mate with each other, in vengeance for the girl. But still,"—a faint shrug—"it was worth it, for the knowledge gained. Gilfaethwy doesn't think so, but then my brother always was a fool. I know you have to stay a virgin. Don't worry. I'll make certain that you stay as one."

He reached out a hand and I took it. The snow whirled in, hiding him from my sight. I could feel his hand warm in mine, but all of a sudden it felt like a claw. I pulled away, but he held me tight. There were feathers all around us and then blossoms, sweet as May. We were no longer in my chamber, but on the shores of Nantlleu, deep in the alder groves that march down to the shingle.

He did not lie to me, not quite. Virgin I remained, though I learned of other pleasures. After that first time, I feared that he might boast about it to the other warriors, but the manner of all toward me stayed unchanged though the gossip among the slaves was that Gwydion had always expressed disapproval of loose women. I do not know how he reconciled this with his connivance in the actions of his brother, but then Gwydion always could believe two contradictory things at the same time. I see now that it is a property of a shaman, a fluidity that helps them to slip through the small cracks of the world's weave, to change form as easily as I might change my gown.

"My brother has no restraint," he said, when I asked him about it. I lay with my head against his arm, staring at my own black hair as it fanned across his freckled flesh. He had the muscles of a scholar rather than a warrior, but he was stronger than he looked. "What he wants, he takes."

"It seems to me that so do you."

"Me?" he said. "Do you think so?" He always spoke in this way, as though nothing really mattered, but it was light as some swords are light, with a sharp edge. "I never want anything."

It seemed strange to me that he should say this when he found so many excuses to seek me out, but I was already in love and I told myself that it was better than he did not lie, tell me that he loved me only to cast me aside when he grew bored. He seemed to want to

talk as much as to make love, and that was flattering.

And so it went, as the spring grew on and Wind month turned to Seed-month and the green grew over the land. I was just beginning to think a little beyond the next day, and to let my closed heart open with the sun, when Gwydion told me that Arian was coming home.

"I will welcome your sister," I said, and meant it. But after a pause, he said as if I had not spoken, "Of course, you'll say nothing of what has passed between us."

"I have no intention of letting her know that we are lovers. Do you take me for a fool?"

"No, but I mean that there must be no hint that I am even—interested—in you."

"Why ever not?" There had already been some rumor in Math's court. There was no reason why we should not eventually wed. I was high born enough, and Math could always find another foot-holder.

"She is—possessive—of me."

"She is your sister. I'm sure she wishes you well and is concerned for you." But something in the way he said it, that bright sword-edge under the words, made me sit up amid the rushes and look at him. And I glimpsed the truth in his eyes, before he turned his head away and the truth slipped and slid. I said nothing more. We were not as the followers of the new god, who believe—or so I hear—that incest is a great sin. But it still dismayed me.

"But Arian is married, is she not?"

"Yes. For some years now, to a man from the east named Constantine."

"Does her husband know?"

"Of course not. She and I were not raised together. Gilfaethwy and I were fostered to a war tribe on Mon. When Arian and I met, we were grown and there was—something."

"But has there been no one else for you?"

He laughed. "Of course. I was even supposed to be wed, once. A girl from Dyfed. When Arian found out, she became hysterical, threatened curses. She has some knowledge of that. It is not, I will tell you now, safe to antagonize her. Anyway, it suits me well enough. If she threatened to put Constantine aside, as she could do under law—well, let's say I should not be happy with that. But there has never been any real threat of it." He laughed. "Besides, she likes the status that her husband gives her, and the comfort of his wealth. You have nothing to fear—as long as you keep quiet."

I did not know what to do. My own position was fragile. Gwydion could ruin me with a word if he chose. I remembered the words of the oak-wife, spoken to me long ago. *Girls should be as mountains. Fertile slopes, but snow-cold at the summit behind the clouds that they draw.* And so I told myself that I would indeed stay as chill as the snows of Yr Wyddfa, and as silent. I even tried to withdraw from Gwydion, but he would not have it. He seemed genuinely bewildered that I should wish to, and a little amused.

"If you leave me, I'll be angry," he said, smiling as he said it.

"But if you tell me now that you love her, Gwydion, then I will walk away."

"Ah," he said, and smiled again, and said nothing more. I tried to find reassurance in it, but the words flowed like water, and their meaning drifted away like blossoms on the wind.

I did one thing well. I remembered the words of the oak wife, and worked on the conjuring of my *nemeton*, drawing it up through frustration and love and hurt, and a great growing rage. I conjured it from blackthorn and nettles, from bramble and briar, from the wood-wife's tree and the serpent's sting, burn-green and sharp-tooth, protecting myself through the world's will.

When Arian arrived, amid much confusion and fuss, she was not as I expected. I had imagined someone dark and shadowy, like Gwydion. But Arian was small, with hair the color of the moon. Her totem, whose emblem she wore, was the ermine and she reminded me of one: little and greedy and quick, with a swift snapping bite. And like her totem, she was clearly jealous of her territory. She could have known little enough of me, but her cold, green gaze summed me up quickly enough. She knew that something was going on. She gripped her brother's arm with tight possessiveness and made sure she sat next to him at the evening's feast. She wore red, I remember, the color of danger and blood, flying the war-banner, as women do. Around her neck, she wore a sea-colored shell on a silver thread, and when I deemed it polite to admire it, she looked a challenge into my face and said that it had been a gift from her brother after one of the war raids. "My husband was a little put out," she said, lifting her chin with pride at the trouble she had managed to cause, "but I told him not to be so foolish. He brought me something just as beautiful, after all." The message was clear. But she had to tilt her head to look me in the eye and I did not think she liked that at all. I am sure the men thought we were getting along wonderfully.

And after this, strangely, we were indeed well enough together, though wary, like two cats in the same small room. Her husband was usually with her, a quiet man much older than Arian. He rarely spoke,

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Dancing in

Puberty can be a difficult passage, but it marks bigger changes in some than in others.

By Jay Lake
Illustration by Matt Tisdale

the Light of Giants

RED AS AN OLD MAN'S EYE, SUN FINALLY SETS. SILVER MOON-BRAID GLITTERS WITHIN the fog of stars in night's sky as I go forth. My time is come, I am to be a woman, but before I can take up with Kamm, or henna my hair, or keep chickens of my own, I must do this dance

I am done with being a girl. I smile and ease my way shadow soft through the stand of peeans gnarled and old that fence our little village. People watch me from behind tight woven curtains or in their brass mirrors fogged with breath, but still I am alone for the first time in my life.

Rugged hills to the west are yet warm from the sun's kind regard. My feet tickle among moss and ferns, catch tiny sticks with a prick to remind me of who and where I am. I arrive at the ridge and stand before the Man High Gate. Here our people come when we grow large enough to be men and women, and here is where we finally go again when we are grown too large to be ourselves.

I slip through the standing stones with their glittering eyes, into the meadow beyond. "Look," I say aloud, laughing, "there is Grandfather Stott."

He lies buried, huge and proud, the great hook of his nose a thunderous echo of my own face's sharp curve. I run to Grandfather Stott. His eyes gleam like any star as I curtsey before him, stroking the long bridge of his nose, now taller than I am. I whirl into dance, exploding like a robin in a dust bath, throwing head, and hair, and arms out as offerings to the world. I will be a woman, see me dance.

After a while the gleam in Grandfather Stott's eyes brightens to a beacon, casting my shadow on the hill and lighting the ridge so that from the village beyond it will look as if I have set a fire. I kiss his porous, stony cheek where his head swells above the bulging earth, then run on to dance for Auntie Swallowtail. There is a whole night yet, and dozens of the giants are still awake enough to see.

Dawn comes, orange and pure, borne on wings of birdsong, as I lie gasping and sweating, coated with chilly dew just outside the Man-High Gate. My clothes are long gone to the dance, but as Kamm approaches me, I just smile. Knowing what he would find, he has brought a blanket and a shovel.

"Your mother sends this," Kamm says draping the blanket over me. "And your father, this." He lays the shovel down next to me. "Shall we dig?"

Now that I am a woman, I must begin to dig my pit, for someday when I am grown too large for the Man High Gate I will come at dusk to lower myself into the earth and watch through the ages for new children to come dance in my light. But there are years between here and there, and Kamm to kiss and invite beneath my blanket, and the birds to sing their promise of morning.

In *my* life, dawn will never end.

Christmas apples

Robert Frost once said that "Home is the place that when you go there, they have to take you in." Sometimes the only problem is finding your way there.

EVERYONE REMEMBERS WHAT THEY'VE LOST COME Christmas. Most of it I can't help with: innocence, the love of one's family, and a sense of wonder are not things that can be tracked, no matter how good your nose is. But for the smaller, more tangible things, people sometimes come to me at the holidays.

Used to be I didn't turn them away because I needed the money. These days I'm enough of a grownup to admit that I'm not doing much else. So I listen to my clients tell me what's missing, get the scent, and follow my nose out into the cold.

Still, business only goes so far, and I had always set my limit at Christmas Eve. Sarah's solstice party had been earlier that day—a few days late, her girlfriend was up in Toronto on the actual solstice, so Sarah claimed she wasn't a good enough pagan to bother about calendars and invited everyone over for the evening of the 24th. It had been a good party, too, as Sarah's parties go; usually there's a movie going on in the background that no one pays any attention to, at least one argument over some aspect of paganism, and someone always gets drunk within the first hour. (This time it wasn't me, thank God.) A clutch of magicians huddled in one corner arguing semantics and clamming up any time someone "normal" came by. I took pity on them and brought them a few trays of little quiches, which disappeared within minutes. I spent most of the evening arguing with Sarah's cousin and ducking questions about what I was doing for the holidays.

By the time I got home, I was in a reasonably festive mood. The light on in my waiting room dispelled that mood the minute I pulled up to the curb. I sighed, blew on my fingers to warm them, and headed up ready to tell someone that no, I couldn't help them tonight.

He was waiting for me, pacing just outside the door that read *G Scelan, Finder*. He was a small man, about half a head shorter than me, blond, and with a weird windburned look, as if he'd been out in the cold too long. He wore a long black coat, a little like the angels in *Wings of Desire*, but it took only a second look to know that he wasn't an angel. There were lines on his face in odd places, and while at first glance he hadn't seemed much older than me, those lines were troubling. "You're G. Scelan?" he said, extending one callused hand.

"Genevieve," I said, and shook his hand. His fingers were colder than mine, and since I'd forgotten my gloves, that was saying a lot. "Or just Scelan, if you like. Look, if you're trying to lure me, it's Christmas Eve and I'm not really open—"

"That's why I'm here. Because it's Christmas Eve."

I gave him a long look. You don't last long in the magic business—even on the fringes of it like me—without developing good weirdness sensors. "Let me guess," I said. "Tonight I'll be visited by three spirits, right?"

He smiled mirthlessly. "Don't I wish. If you are, let me know. I can catch a ride with one of them, maybe." I shivered; the heater didn't seem to have come on since I left. Even the little fountain in the corner had given up; its slopes were dry and a little dusty. "I need to find a place," he said.

"Uh-uh. I don't do El Dorado, I won't go looking for the Rosicrucian Stronghold unless you've got a private army, and the only time I've been in the Bermuda Triangle I couldn't wait to get

By Margaret Ronald • Illustration by Chris Cocozza

out. If you're looking for Enfield, I can give you a map, but you'll need your own scuba gear."

"Nothing like that. This is just a house of sorts, and I need to get there tonight."

"I just told you—"

"I can't get to it any other night. Except maybe New Year's, but that way's closed to me," he added with a scowl. I waited for an explanation, but instead he just glared at me. "Look, I heard you can find anything, and hell, this should be easy, it's not even hidden in the usual sense. I can even give you directions."

I drummed my fingers on the side of the fountain. "If you know where it is, why don't you just rent a car? I'll even call a taxi for you."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "You're not listening. I can't go there by myself. I need someone to lead me there. Understand? I had a fight with the—the owners, and they won't let me back in until someone shows me the way."

I didn't like the sound of that either—but for crying out loud, it was *Christmas Eve*. Even Bob Cratchit got to leave work a little early on Christmas Eve, didn't he?

He took my silence for thought. "I can pay for a car, if you need one. I can even pay for your lodging if you need to stay overnight. Please."

I opened my mouth to tell him no—and stopped. What was I going to do, anyway? Stay home and sleep in? Catch a movie? There was Sarah, but she was driving down with her girlfriend to Rhode Island tonight, and they'd be there all weekend. There was Nick—but he was taking care of his little sister Katie. The two of them had had Christmas on their own for some years now, and I didn't want to intrude on that. Nick probably wouldn't call it an intrusion, but—hell, that wasn't a useful line of thought.

And besides, a cold little voice in the back of my mind said, long drives on Christmas Eve are nothing new, right?

"How far is it?" I asked at last.

"About three hours' drive. Either Route 2 or the Massachusetts Turnpike will get you most of the way there."

Three hours was nothing compared with the drive from here to Philadelphia. "Right," I said. "Payment for six hours' work up front. And I want your name—your real one."

I had turned away from him to get my gloves, but when he didn't answer, I glanced back over my shoulder. He stood looking down at his hands, an expression of faint consternation on his weirdly lined face. "I—I'm not sure any more."

Save me from damn magicians, I thought. Can't keep their heads in the present half the time. "Fine. For the purposes of this journey, you're Charlie. Got it? Good." I took a twenty from the wad of cash he gave me and handed it back to him. "You keep this. We're going to need coffee. Car's out front."

I sent Charlie to the corner coffee place while I started up Rattler and waited for the engine to warm. He got back, handed me my fix, and huddled in the passenger seat, rubbing his gloved hands together to warm them. "Heater should start up when we reach Arlington," I told him.

IT STARTED UP A LITTLE PAST LEXINGTON; RATTLER WAS an old car, one of those little hatchbacks the color I called either champagne or dirt, depending on my mood, but he was reliable where it counted, and he'd carried me through a number of Boston accidents. Common sense told me to take the Pike, but I had rarely listened to common sense. "Route 2 it is," I muttered, and took a swig of the coffee. Not exactly Colombian Roast. "You object to music?"

Charlie shook his head, though it became bluntly clear over the next hour that he *did* object to particular kinds of music. I invoked driver's privilege, though, and between Stephen Tyler's caterwauling and my own less than stellar singing, we made it out to Erving without too much trouble.

At first I thought the first glints in the air were just stars; the sky had been clear when we'd left Boston, and that had made it all the colder. But by the time we reached the paper plant at Erving, it was obvious that this was no flurry. "Damn," I muttered.

"Should have taken the Mass Pike," Charlie offered.

"You wanna drive?" I snapped. That shut him up for a while. I didn't think till later about what he'd said, and wondered if we'd even be able to find this place if he were the one driving. Or perhaps I'd just signed on for a high-paid chauffeur's job. At this point I didn't care; I was out of the house on Christmas Eve, and that was reason enough to be here.

THE SNOW BEGAN TO FALL HARDER. AND I HAD TO whack Rattler's wipers to get them to work properly, just in time to see the exit to 91. Charlie nodded to the sign. "Last chance to get to the Pike."

"This is fine."

"For now. It gets worse after Greenfield."

"I don't want to take the friggin' Pike, OK? Not tonight." I glared out at the snow, which fell on unconcerned.

Charlie just shook his head as we skirted the rotary. "You must be insane. Which puts my sanity somewhat in doubt as well."

"There is no Sanity Clause," I muttered to myself. Dad had made that joke sometimes.

Charlie hadn't heard. "I mean, you took this job on without too many questions. Usually I have to talk to people for an hour before someone will even drive me out here."

"Usually?" I turned to look at him, then regretted it as headlights loomed out of the white. "How many times have you done this?"

He shrugged. In the reflected sodium lights, he looked hollow-cheeked, even starved. "Can't remember."

Not very encouraging. "To answer your question," I said, wrestling Rattler's steering into place, "I came so I wouldn't be staring at four walls all night. I usually have trouble sleeping on Christmas Eve." He nodded again, but I could tell his mind was elsewhere. "I answered your question, now you answer mine. What's this place we're headed to? And why of all nights does it have to be now?"

Charlie curled deeper into his coat. "It's complicated. I don't know … " He was silent a moment. Two cars zipped past us, and I had to slam on the brakes to let the second one in. Idiot. "OK. You know apple trees?"

"Not well, but I'm aware they exist."

"Ha. Well, most of them are on rootstock. There's a trick someone learned where you take the top half of one tree and graft it onto the roots of another. So you've got a good hardy root system that might not even be applewood and a top of the tree that bears nice crisp apples of whatever variety you've grafted on."

"Crabapples," I muttered. "They do it with crabapples too." Back in Philly, the fourth-graders had all gotten crabapple trees as part of an Arbor Day tradition or something. I'd wanted one, but we left well before I reached fourth grade.

"So what do you call the tree then? It's still an apple tree, right, and the fruit from it is still apples. Roots don't affect the fruit, except maybe make it easier to grow. But you do sometimes get a bunch of shoots up from the very base of the tree, where the rootstock is sending out its own sprouts." He leaned forward and pressed his hands against the heater vents. "Christmas is a little like that, these days. It's a Christian holiday, no doubt about it, but some of the roots—some of the compromises they made with pagans who had the holiday first—are anything but. And the branches get tangled, till you don't know what's coming from the tree and what from the ground. And all the other trees around, twining their branches … "

He fell silent. I glanced at him. "And your point is?"

"It has to do with the nature of Christmas. There are times when the—the boundaries against my return are less strong. I think I figured it out some time ago: the way people perceived Christmas began to change, and that changed the magic of it. It's the myths that grew up around it that made it a time of forgiveness, rather

than judgment or somber prayer. I don't know whether they came from the Christian concept of grace or the pagan rebirth of the sun, but over time this day—this night—has become a time for exiles to return home."

He was getting into full lecture mode now. I gritted my teeth and kept my eyes on the road.

"Most tales of Christmas these days involve forgiveness of some sort—unless you're Hans Christian Andersen, in which case it's an excuse to have some poor waif die. Scrooge giddy as a schoolboy, George Bailey discovering his life is important in the great scheme of things, every damn Very Special Christmas episode on TV, Drosselmeier and his nephew reconciled—"

"Cram it," I snapped. "Just—just cram it, OK? I can't believe you believe that crap."

Charlie started, as if he'd forgotten I was there. "What?"

"Fellowship and good will and all that baloney. You sound straight off a Hallmark card."

"Maybe there's a good reason why all that's—"

"Bull. The people singing about peace on earth and goodwill to men are the same ones who go home and snipe at each other all evening, or worse." I picked up my coffee cup and drained the last cold drops. I really wanted a drink. "You know, every year in school we had to write this same damn essay: 'What Christmas Means to Me.' Only way I got a decent grade on those was that I learned to lie early on."

CHARLIE DIDN'T ANSWER, JUST KEPT LOOKING AT ME. Rattler isn't a large car, and we were close enough that I could almost hear what he was thinking. "Look," I said finally. "You really want to know what Christmas means to me? No grade-school bullshit?"

"I didn't ask," he said, "But you seem to want to tell me."

I glared at him. "It means driving. Driving all night." I gazed out the windshield again, trying to see the edges of the road. It hadn't been snowing that time, coming from Philly. Just cold, and our car had no heater. "The Christmas before I turned seven, Mom and Dad got in a fight. A big one. It ended the same way their fights always did, with Mom sporting a black eye and a few bruises on her ribs. Only this time she wasn't going to put up with it anymore. So she waited till Dad went out, and she bundled me up and put me in the car, and we drove to Boston, all through the night. I don't know why she chose that night to go, whether she was just sick of it or whether she was afraid he'd eventually hit me, but we didn't go back."

I leaned forward and rubbed the fog off the inside of the windshield. "Dad didn't ever come after us. I think that was his way of saying he was sorry; he gave her the divorce and alimony without complaint, and he never tried to find us, though I know he wanted to."

I glanced at Charlie. He hadn't moved, and his expression was the same, it was as if he hadn't even heard me. "You know what's worse? Dad changed. It took years, and nothing Mom or I did could have done it, but eventually he changed. Learned to control his anger, learned not to hit. Only he didn't learn quick enough, because by the time he got back in touch with us, Mom had already been dead for three years. She never got a chance to meet him as he is now."

"Nice guy?" Charlie asked. I nodded. "Why aren't you spending Christmas with him?"

"Christ, I don't know. He's got family, a whole herd of nephews that love him to death. He calls me sometimes, that's about it." I squinted ahead, the road was getting narrower. "We took the Pike, that time. This is better."

"Won't be for long." He pointed out toward the road, and for a second I caught a glimpse of shadows through the snow. "We head into the mountains from here."

He wasn't kidding. Route 2 loops through the Berkshires, zigzagging up passes that can be harrowing even in full sun. Rattler slowed to a crawl, and twice I had to unroll my window just to get an idea of where the road was. I didn't need to worry about getting sleepy any more; pure adrenaline kept me wide awake. We passed at least three abandoned SUVs; too many people believed all that crap about all-weather vehicles and didn't realize you needed all-weather drivers as well.

It helped a little that none of this disturbed Charlie. Not even skidding on two inches of black ice made him blink. I thought back to when he'd said that usually he had to talk people into driving him out here. He must have done this dozens of times, in all kinds of weather, a little squall like this one was hardly worthy of comment.

THE SNOW SLACKED OFF AS WE REACHED THE TOP OF the last ridge, but the damage was already done. A plow had been here maybe an hour ago, and the slope ahead of us was still thick with snow, creased in thin tracks where other idiots had gone before us. We crested the summit, passing little vacation cottages not much bigger than a closet, and—

—and a thousand lights gleamed below us, candle flames in a vast bowl of a valley. Mountains like cupped hands cradled the towns below as if to keep them safe. The far hills even seemed to carry some traces of the sunset from hours ago; their slopes were deepest green and blue against the black silk horizon. The moon wasn't up yet, and the stars were hard and cold above.

Charlie pointed across me to a thin gold gleam on the far side of the valley. "There. That's it."

I squinted at the gleam. For all I could see, it might have been a star on the horizon. "You can recognize it from this far off?"

"I can tell."

"Let's hope you can get us there." I maneuvered Rattler around the slope and down a grade steep enough for a ski jump. Curtains of ice festooned the cliffs on our right, and trees ineffectively cloaked a drop-off on our left. The road snaked around, bending in impossible ways, and brought us into town.

The straight roads here, even snow-covered, were no trouble after the mountains. Each house seemed a separate box, wrapped for some titanic gift exchange. Lights and glowing Santas and wicker reindeer blurred in my side mirrors.

Charlie gave terse directions through the streets, and eventually the town thinned out too. On either side mountains rose up like sentinels. I followed Charlie's instructions to turn off the highway and immediately floundered in several inches of snow—only the icing on the cake, judging by the drifts to either side. The snowplows wouldn't be through here till morning, and probably late morning at that.

All this time I'd been following Charlie's directions rather than my nose, trusting to him rather than to my talent. In cold weather, my senses were dulled—but with the snow down and a cold clarity over everything, I thought I could scent something on the wind. Something like cinnamon, maybe, or roasting turkey . . . perhaps someone was up late preparing tomorrow's Christmas dinner ahead of time . . .

No. It wasn't that. I slowed to a halt at the next crossroads, squinting at the ice-encrusted road sign. "What are you stopping for?" Charlie asked. "It's this way."

"Hold on just a moment." I rolled down my window and there it was again, cinnamon and evergreen and maybe something like ginger. And most of all, it registered on my *other* sense, the one like scent but not quite. Which meant it wasn't entirely a physical scent. "I think I've caught something."

"Caught what?" Charlie snapped. I couldn't blame him for being angry; it was coming on to two in the morning, and the drive wasn't any more comfortable for him than for me. "Genevieve, I've told you. we go up this road, then take the first left. I know it as well as I know my own skin."

"If you say so—" I began, then stopped. Another scent merged with the first, and this one I knew. Back in Philly, Dad had always made this big batch of drink on the stove. He never said what was

in it; my guess was cider and orange juice and a whole lot of stuff out of the liquor cabinet. But he'd keep it warm all afternoon, tossing in cloves and ginger chunks and anything else that caught his fancy, until the scent filled our whole house. Mull, he called it, and joked that he wouldn't say mulled *what*. And now the scent of it was so strong that I could almost see the kitchen of our old house. "No. It's this way."

"Goddammit, I know where we're going—"

"Do you?" I turned to him, and a gust of wind whistled past me, still carrying that delicious scent. "Look, you've gotten people to drive you here for I don't know how many Christmases. And you gave them directions every time, I expect."

"Of course I did. You think they knew the way?"

I leaned across the seat till my nose was within two inches of his. "How do you know you were right?"

He blinked. "That's not—I wasn't—"

"Frankly, it sounds like a navigation problem to me. Now I know something's up this way, so how about you sit back and wait."

Charlie started to argue, but the wind shook the windows once more, and it seemed to quench something in him. "Fine," he muttered, sinking back in his seat. "I'll just start looking tomorrow morning for someone else.... There's a few hotels down Route 7, you should probably keep that in mind once we're good and lost."

I ignored him and rolled my window back up. The road we took now was completely untouched, Rattler's were the only tracks unrolling behind us in my rear-view mirror. Black trees reached in on either side as if to drag us back, and twice I had to skid to one side to avoid a freshly fallen branch as thick as my arm.

We came to a stop at the foot of a hill. "Lost?" Charlie snapped.

For answer, I leaned across him and opened the glove compartment. "Put these on," I said, handing him my red wool mittens. "You'll need them."

He shook his head, but got out of the car and saw what I had seen from my side of the car: a gold glow up on the hill. I pointed to the steep drive. "Rattler can't manage that, but you and I can. Come on."

Charlie stared up at the house on the hill. "I don't believe it," he murmured.

"I do. Now get moving, I don't want to freeze in sight of my goal."

WE MADE OUR SLOW WAY UP THE HILL, SLIPPING and skidding as we went. The moon had risen as we made our way through the valley, and knife-edged shadows now limned every indentation in the snow. Past another hairpin turn the drive flattened out, and shadows leapt up from the new light ahead of us.

I stumbled and had to stand for a moment, hands braced on knees, before I could look at the house without feeling as if the hill was about to slide away under me. The whole house seemed to blur when I looked at it straight on, like when you try to see your own blind spot. For a moment it seemed a huge fortress of white glass, then a nautilus-chambered tower, then a huge wooden lodge firelight flickering from every door. I turned my head so that the house appeared only in my peripheral vision, and in response it subsided into a plain house, big but no mansion, curled against the side of the hill.

Charlie drew a sudden breath, and when I turned to look at him I knew he saw what I did—perhaps more clearly. The lines on his face seemed to shift and rewrite themselves, and for a fraction of a second he flickered as the house had.

What had I brought here? Thoughts of Perceval and the Grail Castle, of the Dagda's feasting hall, of a thousand otherworldly havens crowded my mind, and a chill deeper than the snow wrapped me.

But I had said I'd take him here, and I would keep my word. Better for business.

I waited till he followed me up to the front doors, then knocked. The doors opened of their own accord, or at least I didn't see anyone open them, and light and music crashed over us. Charlie hesitated a moment on the threshold, and I sighed and tugged him in after me. There's such a thing as getting used to exile.

The whole house was full of revelers. People in costumes that ranged from Victorian to Ghanaian danced in front of a huge fireplace, accompanied by drummers on every kind of drum, some of whom were enthusiastic enough that they drowned out the music. Those not into the music curled up in huge chairs and talked or laughed together. In the back I could see the huddle that for me meant a poker game, though this one seemed to have too many cards. The hearth was wide enough for five people to sit on, and the fire behind its screen burned merrily away, warming the whole house. Across from the hearth, the wall curved up like the inside of a ship turned over, with great wooden ribs separating the windows, and through the windows the valley twinkled. Everywhere the scent of good food and fresh drink saturated the air. I almost felt as if any minute now some minstrel would wander in and strike up the Tale of Heorgar or something like that. Instead someone cranked up the stereo.

The voices around us quieted a moment as the hosts arrived. One was a big man, large as a bear and with a broad, open face. He could have passed for the Ghost of Christmas Present in any community theater if he had deigned to do so. His wife, slender as a willow and as graceful, joined him with a smile that spoke much in a language I didn't know. Together they faced Charlie and me and waited for him to speak.

"Er," he said. "Hi." I glanced at him, and he turned as red as his mittens. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shot my mouth off like that."

The host remained impassive a moment, then broke into a wide grin. His wife came forward and embraced first Charlie, then me. They swept him off in a glad tumult, and I was left to sink into a chair and ask for coffee.

They had it—in every flavor and kind. I could imagine. I settled on decaf, and when I asked if they had milk, six hands offered everything from cream to skim to creamer, plus some vile concoction that the owner swore up and down was mare's milk. It could have been, for all I knew.

I don't remember much of the rest of that night. I remember joining the dancing at some point—I think it was to some weird band called Señor Coconut—and attempting to drum along later. Charlie I only saw at a distance, being greeted by people who evidently were as glad to see him as the hosts.

Eventually the dancers began to retire to various nooks of the house, their energy exhausted. Following their example, I found a heap of blankets in the back of a walk-in closet and crashed out.

At some point I know I dreamed. I was in my old footie pajamas, under the pink blanket Dad had bought for me a long time ago, and the softness under my cheek wasn't a bundled up blanket but one of the throw pillows from our sofa back in Philly, where I would wait for Santa every year and invariably doze off. Mom and Dad were talking somewhere, close enough so I could hear their voices but not make out their words. And what was strange was that it was Mom's voice from when I was six, her young voice, but Dad sounded much older, the way he sounded when I talked to him on the phone these days. Mom as she was then, and Dad as he is now. The light beyond my eyelids flickered on and off, like Christmas tree lights, but I didn't dare open my eyes. If I did, they'd know I was awake. And they talked, and they sounded happy, and the scent of mull filled the house. I snuggled deeper under the blankets, smiled, and drifted off to real sleep.

Bright sun woke me, reaching through the slats of the closet. I pulled myself to my feet, tugged my clothes back into order, and emerged to find the house empty. Piles of rearranged blankets and sleeping bags marked where others had spent the night.

The house wasn't quite deserted, it turned out; the hostess was

Continued on page 81

Continued from page 26

is being held for ransom by the rival kingdom of Herosol, the Twilight People, also known as the Qar and the fairy folk, launch an invasion. Meanwhile, across the Osterian Sea, on the continent of Xand, from whence the first humans came to Elon, the Autarch, absolute monarch of Xis, a patriarchal tyranny derived from Arabian models, is also preparing to invade.

Shadow march's more-than-superficial resemblances to Martin's work mark it as a clear riposte ... but not a palpable hit. The novel is too long by at least a third, the wheels of its plot creak audibly at times, and there's too little payoff even for the first volume of a trilogy. Still, its characters drew me in, and though Williams employs standard fantasy tropes, he seems to be setting the stage for an exploration of the racist and imperialist underpinnings of the genre as the grievances of the Qar are legitimate, and the actions they take against humans are no worse than what they suffered at human hands.

Williams shifts among a variety of third-person viewpoint characters. About a third of the novel takes place in Xis, where a young priestess, Qinnitan, is chosen to become a bride of the Autarch. Her adventures in the royal harem are the most unsatisfying portions of the book. Their purpose is doubtless to prepare readers for Qinnitan's central role in future volumes, but for now she remains a marginal character.

Williams does somewhat better in those sections set in the Twilight Lands. Plot points abound: a mysterious Pact of Glass, which seems to have a binding effect upon the Qar and the humans; rivalries within the fairy host; and the introduction of a changeling—or, rather, the return to Southmarch of an abducted human boy, Flint, who is secretly of the royal bloodline ... and perhaps much more. But these subjects are not explored in depth, and while many questions are raised, few are answered. Nor does Williams seem as interested in fleshing out his Qar characters as he is his human ones—and this reduces the Qar to stock fairyland figures and cuts against his theme of racism.

Only in those sections that take place in and around Southmarch does Williams's talent for characterization come fully into play. The youngest Eddon siblings, twins Briony and Barrick, the former a spoiled princess, the latter a surly youth whose withered arm has left him emotionally crippled, take divergent paths toward maturity when an assassin thrusts unwanted responsibilities upon them. The fate of the kingdom hangs on these brave but overmatched siblings—and Williams made me root for them. ❧

Paul Witcover

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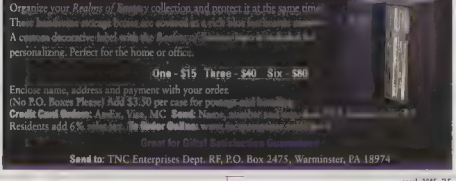
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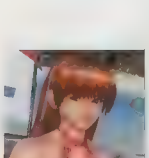
By Eric T. Baker

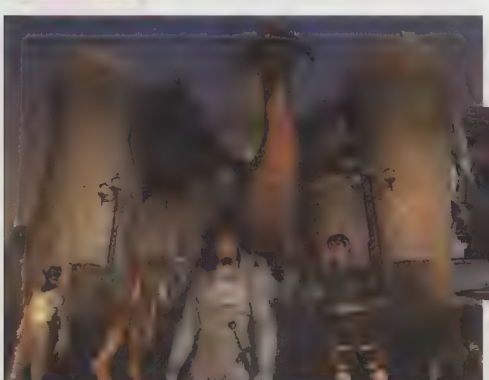
Offerings of action and adventure serve to ring in the new game year.

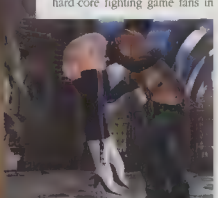


Gameplay in ***Bloodlines*** is done with the Half-Life 2 game engine, which means the game world (particularly on a good computer) looks great and (because of the advanced physics engine) reacts very realistically. Most impressive is the facial animation displayed during the nonplayer character dialog tree sequences. The game zooms in to show just the upper torso of the NPCs and they speak their lines with a full accompaniment of realistic gestures and expressions, right down the rolling eyes and cranking brows.

Bloodlines is rated a well-earned M. The plot and game world are rife with characters and events tailored to the game's horror theme. It isn't that there isn't fighting in the game; there is and some of it can't be avoided, but combat isn't the focus of the game. Long stretches of the action depend more on the characters' scores in persuasion or seduction than their scores in melee or firearms. The game is open ended only in that the players may avoid some of the side quests and there are four different endings, but the story is so interesting and the interactions with the NPCs are so much fun that players won't mind. Whether players are fans of the Vampire the Masquerade world or not, this is a game that anyone who likes horror and vampires can enjoy.

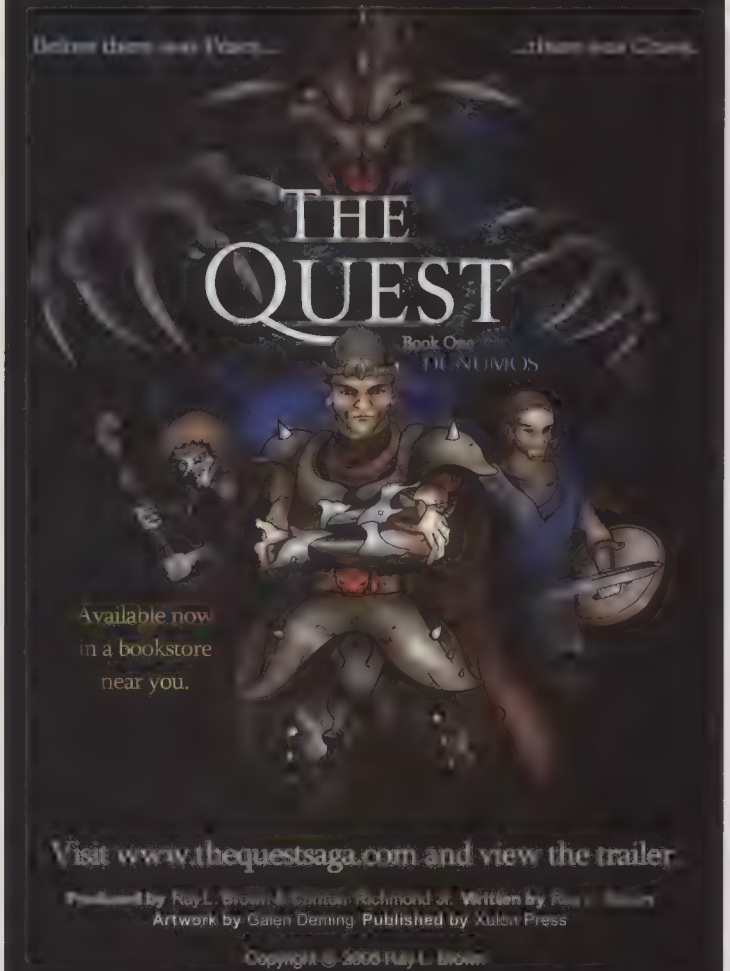
The *Dead or Alive* series has always been sort of the beautiful stepchild of fighting games. Each game's excellent graphics and stunning cut scenes have long been the best in the fighting game genre. The *DOA* games have been more popular with game fans in general than with hard-core fighting game fans in particular because they lack the depth and gore of other popular fighting series. The *DOA* games have always been more about collecting costumes than about tearing out spines.





The latest game in the series, ***DOA Ultimate*** for the Xbox, upholds this tradition, but at the same time brings the arcade experience of fighting games into the 21st century by taking it online. There are two games in the DOA Ultimate box: the original *DOA* game and an update of *DOA 2* (although it actually contains much of *DOA 3*'s content and some of the swimsuits from *DOA Extreme Beach Volleyball*). While it is a cute idea to make the original available, it simply looks too dated for anyone but long-time fans to spend much time playing it. The updated *DOA 2*, however, is well worth playing. The graphics are state of the art: the opening movie, which gives more of the Kasumi and Ayane history, is superb, and there are 15 unlockable costumes for each character.

TOP AND RIGHT: DOA Ultimate *brings together the best of the series' past offerings, along with something new. ABOVE:* Everquest *returns, and it's as impressive as ever.*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ABOVE: Bloodlines *forces players to rely on seduction and persuasion, rather than raw combat*

The online play, done over the Xbox Live network, is structured around virtual rooms for up to eight players at a time. As in an arcade, two players play while the others wait their turn, watching, their virtual quarter on the glass. Rooms can be set so that either winners or losers stay. The game rates players dynamically based on their history, from F to AA, and a search interface lets players look for rooms that contain the game options and the level players they want to fight. Like an arcade, this online system has the advantage that players can always find an opponent, but also like an arcade, it doesn't guarantee that players will find someone of their ability around to challenge.

One of the best anime series currently in production is ***Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex***, an adaptation of Masamune Shiro's classic manga. The series relates the adventures of Major Motoko Kusanagi, her comrade Batou, Chief Aramaki, and the rest of Section Nine, more or less before the events of the manga. Now Ban Dai has released a video game for the PS2 based on the anime series. In different sections of the game, the players take the roles of the Major, Batou, and of a Tachikoma (an AI tank) to fight their way through a story that is different from the events of either the manga or the series.

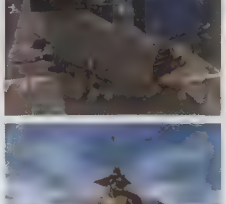
In the anime, the Major, who is a full cyborg, is often seen traveling or fighting while making incredible, Wuxia-like jumps. In fact, the game begins with the Major jumping from an airplane without a parachute, another trope from the anime. After that initial jump, the game provides players with lots of chances to jump the Major about, both in and out of combat. So, it has to be said clearly: Players who do not like jumping puzzles in their action games should not buy *GitS:SAC*. Such players will be ready to throw their controller across the room before they have passed the third save point.

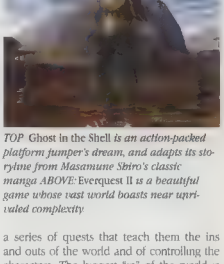
Players who enjoy jumping puzzles will enjoy the rest of what *GitS:SAC* has to offer. There are both high-tech firearms and low-tech but cyborg-assisted hand-to-hand combat. There is also some of the show's signature hacking, although it occurs only in definite places to reach definite ends such as to unlock certain doors or taking control of certain enemies. There are 20 minutes of cut scenes done in high-quality computer graphics that are a treat all by themselves. The levels could have used a little better variety in their scenery, but overall players will have fun jumping their favorite characters through the game's hoops.

The number of massive multiplayer online role-playing games continues to grow, and as of this writing, the one with the most successful launch so far, at least in terms of number of copies sold, is Blizzard's new ***World of Warcraft***. Warcraft has been the background world for a very successful series of real-time strategy games with RPG elements and for some successful RPGs with RTS elements. *WoW* is Blizzard's first "pure" RPG, and apparently a lot of people want to play in the background, even if there isn't an army of NPCs out there for them to command.

It doesn't hurt that *WoW* got some terrific advance press, nor does it hurt that the press turns out to be mostly deserved. In form, *WoW* isn't much different from any of the other MMORPGS on the market, but it has two things going for it. First, next to *City of Heroes*, it is the easiest MMORPG for non-MMORPG players to jump into, understand, and enjoy immediately. The second is that it contains the trademark Blizzard tone and humor. In no other MMORPG will you find the goblins setting up a thunder dome-like racetrack in the middle of the desert.

The background for *WoW* is a fantasy world with men, dwarves, night elves, and gnomes on one side and orcs, trolls, tauren (minotaurs), and undead on the other. Players pick their race, choose a character class, and then are deposited into the new arrivals area where they are guided through





TOP: Ghost in the Shell *is an action-packed platform jumper's dream, and adapts its storyline from Masamune Shiro's classic manga. ABOVE:* Everquest II *is a beautiful game whose vast world boasts near unrivaled complexity.*

a series of quests that teach them the ins and outs of the world and of controlling the characters. The biggest "in" of the world is that that there are no load screens or times between zones. Travel is seamless from one end of the world to the other. For Warcraft fans, *WoW* is more or less a must. For fantasy fans looking for a place to start in the world of MMORPGs, *WoW* is a good bet.

World of Warcraft is not the only hot option for players wanting a new fantasy MMORPG. Sony On-line has just released the long anticipated ***Everquest II***, the sequel to the father of all American MMORPGs. *EQII* is not a "starter" MMORPG. It has a much longer learning curve that players new to the genre will have to climb, veteran MMORPGers, on the other hand, will pick it right up. Once players of either sort have adapted to the interface and mechanics they will be blown away by the size, complexity, and

beauty of this online world

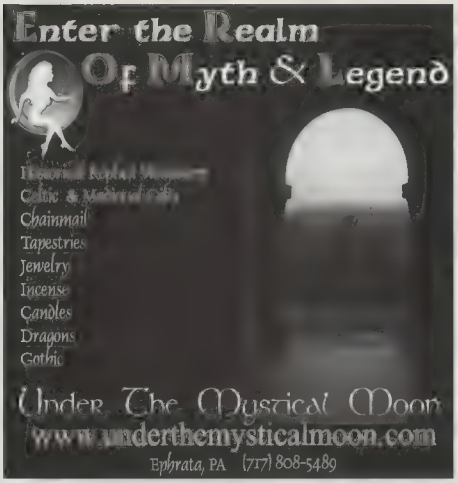
For starters, *EQII* has the most realistic graphics of any MMORPG on the market The better the player's computer system, the better *EQII* will look In addition, most of the NPCs in the game have voices and speak when spoken to There are 70,000 lines of spoken dialog in the game, with two of the major characters voiced by Christopher Lee and Heather Graham, respectively Also, compared to *WoW*'s eight starting races, *EQII* has 16 player races and 24 classes

Despite the glitz and sound, *EQII* is still *EQ*, which mean the emphasis in game play is on "grinding" (killing things or making things to earn experience) and community building There are 160 different types of creatures to hunt, tame, and harvest Players can buy homes and guilds can buy guild houses. Every class can make something, which leads to an active player-based economy containing thousands of different items, many of which work with the multitude of skills and spells available to characters *EQII* is a game for players who want to adventure in a virtual world where everything has been tame tested to be just right

Sharn: City of Towers is a very good source book for use with *Dungeons & Dragons Eberron* campaign setting that contains a wealth of useful information The book is structured much like a Lonely Planet City Guide, with all that is good and bad about that *Sharn* keeps and advances the "feel" of the *Eberron* world with a mix of noir and 1930s pulp. If the editors at Wizards of the Coast had locked Raymond Chandler in a room with Robert E Howard and told them to write a fantasy version of New York city *Sharn* is probably very much the setting they would have created. a high magic world that at least attempts to make sense *Eberron* and *Sharn* answer the question, "What might organized societies really look like if they had access to D&D style magic?"

The opening chapter tells players how and where to access the various services in the city This is incredibly useful for game masters, who will wish it were even longer and more detailed the "Law and Order" chapter that tells you how this aspect of a large corruption ridden, and magic heavy city is expected to work by its citizens and how it often fails. This chapter is again invaluable for GMs

On the other hand, the book could have been greatly improved with the addition of a pullout map The maps within the book are either low-detail or fragmentary, a style often adopted in a large setting book like this In contrast, the text is very detailed, even mentioning specific buildings of note It is a strange combination, but for anyone running an *Eberron* (or an *Eberron*-style) campaign, the *Sharn* is almost indispensable



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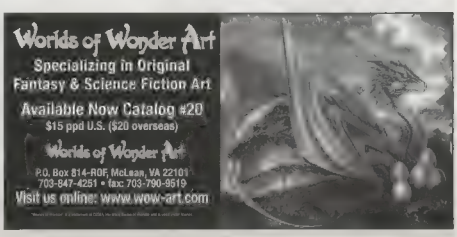
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the lady in white

Continued from page 47

see. "The tale comes to its end, as all things must, so for that at least I am in your debt, for what little that is worth."

"I thought . . ." John stopped, shaking his head. "I'm a fool. She never intended to come back to the living world, did she?" he asked softly.

"Her sanctuary was compromised, so she had to make her long-delayed choice. Which I lost, but I knew the risk. As for you, she used you to reach that place between her world and this where her chosen could find her."

The only thing clear on John's face was his utter confusion. "She used me? You lost?"

"I'm not used to it," the old man admitted. The Devil is seldom cheated, but Death? Never, at least until now. Take some comfort in that, if you can—you are not the only lover spurned this night."

John Alby stared at Alisandra's pool for a very long time and then set his mouth in a hard, grim line. He took a step toward the dark, cold water before he realized the old man was still there, watching him.

"Death, if that's who you really are, you will not have long to wait for me."

The old man sighed. "Oh, stop it. You had your place in our little play, but this was never about you. Not really."

When John just stared at him, he sighed again and reached into his belt and pulled out a well-worn ledger, which he flipped open and shoved under John's nose. "I do owe you a favor, and, since you seem to be having some difficulty, I'll show you the matter plain: here is the day and the date, duly recorded. As you can see, you're going to live a very long time. I suggest you get on with it."

The old man left him there, and because there was really nothing else for him to do, John did go home to Tunby. He never spoke of what happened that day at the pool but, because of the boy John had saved the day before, people came to associate the disappearance of the Lady in White with John's return and made him into a hero despite his objections. In time he learned to let people think what they would, since there was no help for it. Time healed him to the extent he could be healed, and eventually his fame helped him to marry well and grow fat and prosperous.

The details of John Alby's battle with the evil spirit of the pool changed over the years and grew more thrilling with each new version, though John was never the one doing the telling. Less well known is the true story of his end, many years later, when he simply announced that he had an appointment to keep and walked out of his village forever.

He was last seen making his way down the path to the weed-choked forest pond known to this day as the Pool of the Lady in White. ❧

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Christmas Apples

Continued from page 74

up and slicing fruit for a later salad. She saw me and smiled. "They've all gone down to the revels," she said. "We didn't want to wake you."

"That's alright," I said. In daylight, the house was less crowded but no less beautiful, and endless vistas of snow stretched out beyond the windows of the great room. "I should head out, really."

She nodded and bent again over her work. "Thank you again for bringing him back. It meant a lot to all of us."

"Glad to help." I found my coat over the back of an armchair and tugged it on. "You know, this is a silly question to ask—but will I be able to find this place again?"

"Will you need to?"

"I don't know." I looked at my hands, then at her. "I don't think so."

She grinned. She had glasses, I noticed, little ones that perched on her nose and gave her eyes an extra dimension. "That's good, then."

I clomped into the great room, which was down a little set of stairs, then looked back at her, thinking about what Charlie had said about trees and Christmas. "Another stupid question," I blurted before my common sense could tell me to shut up. "Are you root or branch?"

For answer, she picked up a lumpy bundle, crossed the kitchen, and handed it to me. "What do you think?" she said, and kissed my forehead.

Halfway down the hill, I opened the bundle and laughed. One big apple, crisp as an October morning, smiled up at me. Crabapples surrounded it, red and ripe and perfect for throwing at someone.

Rattler took some time to get started, but his heater came on straight away, and eventually I was able to pull away from the drive. My red mittens lay on the passenger seat, as did my cell phone, though I couldn't remember bringing it from Boston. I put the bundle down next to them, drove Rattler around in a tight circle, and followed my own tracks out.

After a few minutes of slow driving, my cell rang, and I picked up. "Evie? It's Nick. I've been trying to reach you all morning."

"I was out on a case."

"God, you really don't rest, do you? Look, Katie's been asking me all morning when you were coming by, so I thought I'd make sure you were. You are, right?"

I grinned. "I should be back in Boston by two. I need to call my dad, though. Say three o'clock?"

"Sounds good. See you then."

He rang off, and I dropped the cell back onto the passenger seat. The white fields opened up ahead of me, and in the rear-view mirror the snow continued unbroken. ❧

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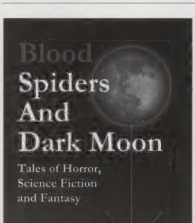

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Blood Spiders and Dark Moon is available at www.amazon.com and www.authorhouse.com.

Blackthorn & Nettles

Continued from page 67

into her lap the whole time and said nothing when the others complimented me.

And still her brother took me to the woods in a shower of flowers, all that summer and on into Leaf-fall-month, when the rowan berries grew red and withered. One morning Yr Wyddfa was white against a white sky, like a bone against skin, and both Gwydion and Arian's husband were sent south in one of the last raids of that year. On the morning they left, Arian clung dry-eyed and white-faced to her husband and her brother in turn and when they had gone she shut herself in her chamber and did not emerge for the rest of the day.

I kept my hollowed heart to myself and tried to keep busy in the kitchen. I even polished the great cauldron that Math's own oak-wife had left behind when she passed into the Wheel. When Arian came down, she immediately began taking inventory of the kitchen supplies. There was much to be done—slaughtering and skinning and bottling and spinning–and Arian and I suddenly found that we were glad of one another's presence. For her, everything had to be perfect. She ran the slaves ragged, but she and I got along better in the absence of the men, and we took to cooking together in the evenings. I did not speak of her brother. On the few occasions I had reason to mention his name, I saw her face grow pinched and sour, though she herself talked of him often, harping on their closeness. Within me, fury grew, and with it a strange unwilling affection for Arian herself. Once, she wrote a song for the pleasure of the other women, about a girl whose lover leaves her for the mists of the mountain, and I could see that she had talent, too. But there were also days when Arian's smugness caused the hate and resentment to rise to choke me. I sat over my spinning and imagined myself getting up from the chair, going down the stairs, taking Math's old war-club from the wall, and striking her in the face with it, over and over again, until there was nothing left of her but a bloody pulp. And then I would see her and an unwilling affection would rise in me all over again.

One day, late in Slaughter-month when the leaves were hanging yellow on the trees, the sister of Math's dead oak-wife came to visit, bringing simples and charms with her. Arian and myself were engaged in spinning in the tower room. The oak-wife's sister watched us for a while, and remarked that it was good to see two women who were close friends, adding acidly that it was surely one of the Three Lost Blessings. I met Arian's gaze for a long minute, and neither of us spoke, but I knew what we were thinking. For we were not friends, but close enemies, and I wondered, then as now, whether there is so great a difference, at the end.

Later the oak-wife's sister asked to speak to Arian alone. I did not find out until years later that she had approached Arian as matchmaker between myself and Gwydion. It seemed talk about us had broken loose after all, and the match was considered to be a good one. Arian, of course, said nothing of it to me. I do not know what excuse she made to the oak-wife's sister, but she was bitter-faced all the rest of that day, and snapped her ermine teeth at me. She got her words flung back at her, but I stopped short of the conversation we should not have and spent the evening bunching herbs in the cauldron room. I felt as though the cauldron was looking at me, a great dark eye behind my back.

At autumn's end, shortly before Samhuin and the new year, the men came home, leading the captured pigs and cattle before them. That night a sudden shower of rain pattered against the hanging at my window, from a clear cold sky, and Gwydion was there. In the days that followed, we fell into our old pattern: sleeping together every few days, talking always. And so I was happy for a time. Arian and I settled back into our cart-track of comfortable hate and so the winter wore by: up at dawn, to bed at dusk, the same stories told over and over until the captured pigs became the great boar of the Otherlands, snatched from the depths of Annwn rather than the hills of Dyfed.

Then, one morning, I went down to the council chamber to find the place with a hive-hum. Math's face was cold and set, though he spoke gently enough to me. Gwydion was standing in the shadows, his gaze haunted, not looking at me.

"Bring her in," Math commanded. The guards left, to return with Arian, her hands bound, her hair disheveled. Her husband Constantine followed, his saturnine face more closed than ever.

"So," Math said to Constantine, "You say that she is with child, and it is none of your begetting?"

"It cannot be. I was in the south when it was conceived."

"Then who do you accuse?"

"One who can come and go as he pleases. One to whom a journey of many thousand *llaith* is no more than a step through a door of air." He did not look at Gwydion, but everyone knew who he meant.

"He didn't—" Arian cried, and, very strangely, I believed her. Math looked at me.

"You were here with her, in this fort, all the while. Did you see anyone come and go?"

"My lord, I did not." I would have loved to have set her life alight, but it was not the truth. Arian flashed me an unreadable glance.

"Let her step over the branch and see the truth of it," Math commanded. One of the guards hastened away and came back bearing a branch of blackthorn, curled and gnarled by ivy, the ancient wife-of-the-wood, the witches' tree.

"No!" Arian cried, but the guards seized her arms and forced her forward, over the branch. She looked frantically at her husband and her brother, but both of them lowered their gaze.

At first, nothing happened, and Arian gave a triumphant smile, but then the hem of her skirts twitched and something small and dark and quick darted out. It hissed at all of us, then fled behind a tapestry and was gone. Arian's face was a mask of horror. I listened in silence as Math condemned his niece to exile and her brother's charge.

"Wait!" Gwydion began, but Math silenced him with a look. Behind my walls of air, weaving my *nemeton*, I could feel him seeking my gaze, but I would not give it. When Math ordered Gwydion out of the chamber, I would not look up, beyond blackthorn, beyond nettles. I would not look up, either, as they led his sister shrieking away.

But that night, in the hollow silence that follows disaster, I went down the stairs to the council chamber, pausing only to collect a falconer's glove.

When I looked behind the tapestry, it was still there. It squirmed and spat when I picked it up and sank its sharp teeth into the glove, but it no longer had the power to do me harm and it knew it. It looked a little like a polecat, but black and hairless, with small human hands and watery red eyes. I think it tried to speak, but its thick tongue could not manage the spirals of the Cymric and I did not want to hear whatever it might have to say to me. I took it, mewling and glaring, to the oak-wife's cauldron and then I closed my eyes and let myself drift away into blackthorn blossom and nettle flower. When I opened my eyes again, the cauldron was filled with dark and starlight, and it was then that I dropped the thing I had, the thing that Arian had been carrying inside her for so many months, the child that was no child at all, but simply her hate for me. I dropped it over the cauldron's lip and watched it fall.

That night, I left Math's fort and made my way south to my father's lands. There, the oak-wife welcomed me and asked no questions, then or ever. It was through her that I learned that Arian had gone alone to the coast and shut herself up in a sea-tower that had once belonged to her mother, and would see no one, especially her brother. But I had left her hate behind and cared nothing for this news—or so I thought.

For that cauldron of starlight is within us, within all women, and whatever one casts into it finds form. The hateful thing that I believed I had cast from me had taken root, inside. Months later, I gave birth to a daughter, a child as swift as an ermine and as pale as the moon, and I found that my hate had left me at last. I sent word to the sea-tower then, and together we waited among the blackthorn and the nettles, for her mother to come. ❧

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